

Chapter 1

Harry wiped the sweat from his brow with the hem of his sleeve and let out a sneeze, if the stifling heat didn't kill him the dust would.

He'd been stuck cleaning the attic for the past three days, apparently Dudley needs a new room for all his weight lifting equipment as he needs to stay "*Strong and in shape*" to keep his Junior Weight Champion title, or to beat up little kids, though Harry doubted Dudley would ever do more up here than sit on his arse and hoard food.

He didn't really mind the constant mindless work they've been making him do ever since he came back from school, he'd welcome just about anything to keep his mind off. Sirius... Quickly shaking the thought from his mind and letting out a sigh he walked to a corner of the attic towards a stack of boxes covered by a dingy white sheet, he pulled off the sheet and as it came down it left a thick cloud of dust in the air.

Harry coughed and squinted his eyes to see through the dust. There were three large cardboard boxes stacked on top of a worn oddly shaped leather case; the case was well-worn and old, with great brass studs along all of the seams and gold latches on the front. Quickly grabbing the boxes ("Dudley's Baby Things") and tossing them aside he got to his knees and pulled the case towards him, looking at it closely he could see that it was a guitar case, what would a guitar case be doing in the Dursley's attic? They weren't exactly what you'd call the creative type, looking over the case he saw something scrawled in gold on the side, he wiped the dust off the signature and a bolt of shock ran down his spine. **Lily Evans** was written just above the latches, why would something of his mother's be in the Dursley's attic?

He slid his hands down the front of the case and carefully undid the latches, a wave of anticipation washed over him, this was his *mother's*! It opened surprisingly easily, peering inside he let out a small gasp.

A dark colored acoustic guitar was nestled snugly in the red velvet lined case, from what he could see the sound hole was intricately

carved with lilies, just as he was reaching inside the case to pull out the guitar he heard Uncle Vernon from the bottom of the stairs

“HURRY UP BOY! Get down here now or you’ll get no dinner!” Uncle Vernon screamed up at him.

“I won’t be having those freaks accusing us of starving you!”

“Something I’m sure you’d never do” Harry muttered

“What’d you say boy!”

“I’m coming!” as soon as Harry heard his Uncle’s footsteps recede he hurriedly closed the lid and threw the sheet back over the case, whispering a silent promise to come back later and high-tailed it down the stairs lest Dudley eat both his own dinner and Harry’s.

Mom played the guitar? Why didn’t anyone ever tell me? What were his mother’s things doing in the Dursley’s attic? Harry’s mind was a jumble of thoughts as he made his way down the stairs and to the kitchen

“About time boy” Aunt Petunia snapped at him

“We’ve been waiting for ages”

“Waiting? You’ve never waited for me to start eating” Harry asked suspiciously *“They want something”*

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing boy! Just sit down and eat the food you Aunt prepared!” Still glaring suspiciously at his “Family” Harry slid into his chair, *“What the hell is this?”* poking the charred *stuff* on his plate with his fork *“If Voldermont doesn’t kill me Aunt Petunia’s cooking will”* spearing what he could only guess was a piece of meat and popping it into his mouth

“Guess I’m not a Gryffindor for nothing” he thought sarcastically as he speared more “food” trying to finish as fast as possible, as soon as he finished his so called meal he stood up to bolt to the attic

“Hold it boy! We have something we need to *discuss* with you!” Uncle Vernon bellowed at him, “*I knew it*” Harry thought with a sigh as he slid back into his seat

“Tomorrow you Aunt Marge will be coming for a visit and you will”

“WHAT!”

“Don’t interrupt me!” Vernon’s face was already changing from red to puce, his voice calmed slightly

“When Marge arrives you will come down, help her with her bags, and then go to your room and not come back for the rest of her stay”

“Fine with me” Harry grumbled, Uncle Vernon chose to ignore that comment

“Petunia will bring you a meal once a day, you will be allowed out for bathroom breaks twice a day, there will be NO funny business” Uncle Vernon said forcefully

“Do you understand boy?”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon” Harry stated blankly “Can I go now?” Vernon grunted at him and he took it as an affirmative, he jumped up and headed up the stairs and to the attic.

Chapter 2

Trying to look nonchalant Harry walked up the stairs and into the attic heading straight for the sheet covered area, checking over his shoulder to make sure no one was behind him he pulled off the sheet, it was getting quite dark in the attic and he could barely make out his mother's name on the case, he wanted to get a closer look at it in the attic to lessen the chance of the Dursley's seeing it but it was too dim, gently grabbing the handle and lifting the case he walked back out of the room.

Walking as quietly as possible and hugging the walls Harry finally made it to his "room" and slipped inside, placing the case on the bed and kneeling in front of it he flipped open the latches,

"Here goes nothing" he thought. Taking a deep breath he gingerly lifted the dark guitar out of its velvet embrace, holding it in his hands he let out a gasp, it was an even more beautiful than he thought!

At the top of the neck the head of a dragon rested, its round kind eyes wide and soft, and its body curved around the body of the guitar and its tail curving around the Fretboard and ending at the headstock, the tail was also holding a large lily and the tuners were also shaped like lilies and the bridge was also decorated with the tiny version of the flowers. Holding the guitar his mind flashed back to one of Dudley's very few guitar lessons he was forced to watch, back when the great lump was going through his "Rockstar" phase, Harry's fingers easily set into the C cord and strummed gently, just hearing the soft notes brought a smile to his face.

He slowly began to move his fingers to different cords still gently strumming on the guitar, losing himself in the gentle sound of the music until he was awakened out of his daze by a tapping on his window, looking up he saw a haughty looking barn owl perched on his window sill, placing the guitar back on his bed he walked to the window to let the irritated owl in earning him a sharp nip on the ear

"God! Sorry" he said giving his ear a rub *"Damn Owls"* as soon as he relived the owl of its burden it took off out the window, still rubbing his

ear he broke the slightly familiar seal on the roll parchment
"Gringotts? Why are they sending me a letter?"

Dear Mr. H. Potter,

We at Gringotts bank regret to inform you that we have received the news of the passing of your Godfather Sirius Orion Black; we offer our deep and heartfelt condolences. We were entrusted with the last will and testament of Mr. Black and due to the fact that you have been named a beneficiary to his estate, we request that you attend a will reading at Gringotts Bank in Diagon Alley in one week ,precisely at 10 am. If you are unable or unwilling to make the trip you can appoint a representative to take you place or you can contact us and one shall be appointed for you. Please be on time as our time is very valuable. Not attending this ceremony and having no representative will result in forfeiture of anything you may receive, all assets and money will be claimed by us.

Sincerely,

Thicklock,

President of Gringgots Bank.

For a second all Harry felt was a complete numbness, then a wave off grief fell over him *"How could I have let myself forget?"* the though brought shame to his mind *"How can I sit here playing a guitar while my godfather is dead!"* he could feel the tears rushing to his eyes, blinking rapidly he forced them back *"No, I will not cry"* Breathing heavily and still trying to keep himself from crying Harry barley noticed the second owl fly through the still open window and land on his desk until it let out a loud hoot

"KEEP THAT BIRD QUIET BOY! SOME PEOPLE ACTUALLY HAVE TO GET OFF THEIR ASSES AND WORK!" Uncle Vernon shouted from his and Aunt Petunia's bedroom. Quickly relieving the bird of its burden and shoving an owl treat in its general direction to shut it up he just noticed it was a school owl *"School letters shouldn't be coming so soon"* he thought as he broke open the seal.

Harry,

I have just received a letter from Gringotts informing me that I am to attend the will reading of the late Sirius Black, as I have received it I have no doubt that you have also but Harry I must stress, you cannot leave the Dursley's home. I have no doubt that you want to attend the reading ,and you have every right to, but after what you have learned you know that you are invaluable and I cannot in good conscience let you put yourself in that kind of danger. For these reasons I have taken the liberty of appointing myself as your representative, I know I have promised to keep nothing from you and to stop sheltering you but you must understand, I am only doing what is best for you.

Albus Dumbledore

By the time Harry was done reading the letter he could feel his hands shaking, his vision getting blurry, and a rushing in his ears

"How dare he!" he raged *"What gives him the right to control my life! Best for me my ass! I will not be his weapon!"* All of a sudden he felt his hands burning, looking down he saw the letter burning in his hands, he tossed it to the floor and watched it burn to ashes.

Taking a deep breath he turned back to his bed to a looked at the guitar, the dark wood and simple beauty contrasting sharply with the threadbare sheets on the worn bed, he once again picked it up and placed his hands back on the cords but he couldn't seem to get back to the peaceful place he was before the letters arrived. Letting out a sigh he went to place his mother's guitar back into the leather case but when he looked inside he caught a glimpse of something, setting the instrument aside he put his hand inside and grabbed the thing, pulling out a small purple leather journal.

A/N: Hello all and thank you for reading! Don't forget to R&R! here is a link to the picture of the guitar I go the idea from, its an electric one but whatever lol.

Chapter 3

Holding the small but thick book in the palm of his hand Harry cautiously flipped open the cover, he'd had some bad experience with diaries, hesitantly he flipped to the first page. Instead of the musings he expected to find the page was filled with the lines of a song

*Hello, good morning, how you do?
What makes your rising sun so new?*

*I could use a fresh beginning too
All of my regrets are nothing new*

*So this is the way that I say I need you
this is the way*

This is the way

That I'm

*Learning to breathe
I'm learning to crawl
I'm finding that You and You alone can break my fall
I'm living again, awake and alive
I'm dying to breathe in these abundant skies*

*Hello, good morning, how you been?
Yesterday left my head kicked in
I never, never thought that
I would fall like that
Never knew that I could hurt this bad*

*Learning to breathe
I'm learning to crawl
I'm finding that you and you alone can break my fall
I'm living again, awake and alive
I'm dying to breathe in these abundant skies*

These abundant skies

So this is the way I say I need You
This is the way that I say I love You
This is the way that I say I'm Yours
This is the way, this is the way

That I'm

Learning to breathe
I'm learning to crawl
I'm finding that You and You alone can break my fall
I'm living again, awake and alive
I'm dying to breathe in these abundant skies

These abundant skies

Yes I'm dying to breath in these abundant

Skies

A smile touched his lips as he finished reading the last lines of the song, *"Did mom write this?"* The next page held the notes for the song. He continued to flip through the journal, his eye steadily widening, nearly every page was filled with songs.

Still feeling slightly cross and he placed the note back between the pages then put both the book and the guitar back in the case and slid it under his bed, glancing at the clock on his dresser he let out a sigh,

"2:45am might as well get to bed" pulling on his pajamas he threw himself into bed, dreading the nightmares that awaited him.

Harry woke up gasping for breath, trying to push the images from his head, it seemed like every time he closed his eyes he was forced to watch Sirius fall through the veil or Hermione getting hit with that curse, or see Cedric's blank eyes staring up at him. It was never ending! Trying to calm himself he continues laying on his bed and staring up at the ceiling, *"Why can't I ever just get a break from all this?!"* It seemed like no matter what he did death and sorrow followed him everywhere, every year he was forced to face Voldemort, to face more pain than anyone his age ever should.

Harry finally sat up and leaned against the wall and looked out the window, it was still dark out but he knew there was no way he was getting back to sleep, *"No rest for the wicked, eh?"* he thought with a snort as he dragged himself out of bed and to his still packed trunk, pulling out his school pants (the only ones that fit) and an overlarge hoodie and stuffing his feet into a random pair of old sneakers he inched open his door and headed down the stairs making sure to skip the last as it squeaked, many years of supporting Dudley and Vernon's weight had nearly destroyed it.

Harry stepped out of the house and walked down Privet Drive, he had barely made it two steps when he heard someone call his name from the bushes

"Maybe the Daily Prophet was right" he muttered, resuming his walk "now I'm hearing talking bushes"

"Harry! It's me, Remus" walking toward the bush he spotted Remus Lupin slipping an invisibility cloak off his head

"Professor Lupin?"

"Yes but I'm no longer your Professor, it's Remus or Moony" he said, a small smile playing on his lips.

"What are you doing here?"

"Dumbledore has us on watch duty again" Harry could feel the flash of anger run through him

"Of course, wants to keep his weapon safe doesn't he?" he said with a sneer

"Harry" Lupin said letting out a sigh "you know Dumbledore only wants to keep you safe"

"Yeah and he's been doing a damn fine job of it so far hasn't he" he barley noticed his voice getting louder

"Calm down Harry. We all just want to do what is best for you" He spoke in a calming tone of voice.

Running a hand angrily through his hair “How is it that no one ever asks *me* what is best for *me*?!”

“Look Harry, I just thought I’d remind you that you are not supposed to leave the protection of the Dursley’s home. Which means that you are not to leave the house” Lupin stated firmly. Harry could feel the blood rushing to his ears.

“Great! Lock me away!” Harry raged

“Harry-”

“Keep me safely locked away in this hell hole! Just like Sirius!” a sudden silence filled the air, Remus’s face went white and a pained expression filled his features. Turning away from him Harry strode off back up the Dursley’s front steps.

Entering his “Home” Harry made his way back up to his room, just restraining himself from slamming his door, pacing his room restlessly he started to feel the gnawing feeling of guilt invade his stomach, “*Why did I snap at him like that?*” he thought

the image of Lupin’s hurt expression flashing through his mind, “*He’s probably feeling worse than I am, he was much closer to Sirius than I was!*” thinking back he could see the large bags under Lupin’s eyes, the lines on his face looked deeper than they did the last time he saw him, running his hands over his face he fell back into his bed “*I’ve got to learn how to control my temper*”.

Turning his head slightly he spared a glance out the window, seeing the sun start to rise, “*Might as well start of breakfast*” pulling himself out of bed he headed back downstairs and to the kitchen. Yawning and trying to keep his bangs from catching on fire, Harry threw two of the four packs of bacon into the frying pan, Dudley had officially given up on his “diet”, he’s a “Growing boy and needs all his protein if he wanted to become a big strong man like his Father, he was nearly skin and bones already!” Harry had nearly choked trying to keep from laughing when he heard Aunt Petunia say that especially since just the day before Dudley sat at the table and broke a chair.

Placing the huge plate of bacon on the table Harry got started on the eggs hearing the great lumbering steps of Uncle Vernon on the stairs, he could hear the bottom step screaming in protest

“Comb your hair boy!” Vernon grumbled as he entered the kitchen

“Good morning to you too” Harry said under his breath

Throwing his bulk into his chair (causing Harry to back up, not wanting another repeat of Dudley’s incident) “Where’s my coffee” he snapped.

After breakfast (In which Dudley managed to eat nearly every scrap of food on the table without taking a breath) Harry started to make his way back up to his room

“Hold it” Uncle Vernon said from behind him

Slowly turning himself around Harry looked up into his face, noticing that he was nearly as tall as Vernon “Yes, sir?” he asked flatly, he could see the man’s face starting to change colors already, he could see Dudley’s face light up at being able to see Harry getting bullied.

“You think you can just go lazing about in this house?” *“Here it goes”* he could practically feel his eyes glazing over, *“I wonder how many colors he can change into”* he thought watching Vernon’s face go from red to purple, *“I wonder how long it will take before his head explodes”*

“-and don’t even think about eating again until you have it all done!” Vernon finally finished his rant, he shoved a list into Harry’s hands and stumped into the living room Dudley and Aunt Petunia following close behind him. Sighing in exasperation Harry eyed the rows of chores knowing there was no way he’d finish it all today

Weed and water the flower beds

Mow the Lawn

Groaning he went back upstairs grabbed an old t-shirt and stepped outside, shielding his eyes from the already pounding sunlight he didn't notice the large raven fly into his open window.

A/N: The song is "Learning to Breathe" by Switchfoot. Not the best of most interesting chapter but I'm having a bit of writers block. Thank you for reading! Don't forget to review!

Chapter 4

Taking off his muddy shoes at the back door Harry shuffled inside the house, sweat rolling off of him after being stuck out in the surprisingly oppressing heat working in the yard, the cold air hitting him immediately, it had to be the one and only time he was actually grateful to be inside the Dursley's home.

Walking into the house he was surprised at the complete silence, usually by this time of day all the Dursley's would be in the living room, Aunt Petunia peering out the window at the neighbors trying to catch them in some big scandal, Uncle Vernon sitting in his chair with the newspaper grumbling at the whatever he was reading, and Dudley sitting as close to the TV as physically possible with the volume blasting and shoveling food into his garbage disposal of a mouth.

Shrugging it off he grabbed a bottle of water out of the refrigerator, leaning against its cool metal with a content sigh, he let the cold liquid slide down his throat, savoring the peace and quiet. Dragging himself to the trash to throw away the now empty bottle he was startled by the sound of the crunching of tires on the gravel in the driveway, figuring it was just the Dursley's back from whatever trip they were on he started to head up the stairs, just as he made it to the middle step the front door flung open and Uncle Vernon stepped in.

"BOY! COME DOWN HERE AND HELP YOUR AUNT WITH HER BAGS!" he bellowed. The color drained from Harry's face, "*How could I forget?!*" Peering out the door he could feel intense dislike spreading through him. Aunt Marge was waddling up the sidewalk, her nasty little dog Ripper yipping at her heels, "*This day just keeps getting better and better*" with all the speed of a flobberworm Harry went down the stairs and to where his Uncle and now Aunt Petunia were standing

"What are you doing?! You could have tried to make yourself presentable!" she hissed at him, looking down at himself he noticed his torn and dirt smudged jeans and t-shirt, he was sweaty, his feet were bare and his hair was wilder than ever.

“Why?” he said rolling his eyes “she enjoys having something to criticize me about” not waiting for them to reply he walked outside and toward Marge, she was once again wearing her tweed suit and there were smudges of something white around her mouth.

“Still here boy?” she sneered at him, her breath hitting him straight in the face “*Tartar sauce*” he thought, turning his head away. He had to fight back a gag as her tongue snaked out of her mouth to lick her mustached top lip.

“If it had been me I would have dropped you off at an orphanage first chance I got” “*And off she goes ladies and gentlemen*”.

“You should be grateful that your Aunt and Uncle are kind hearted enough to keep you around” not even listening he stepped around her and to the boot of the car to grab her bags, dodging Dudley as he aimed a punch at his head. There were at least 4 bags in the car, “*Damn, she must be staying for awhile*” pulling out two rolling suitcases and slinging a third over his shoulder he struggled back into the house.

Trying to make as much noise as possible he thumped the suitcases up the stairs and threw them into the guest room, sprinting down the stairs he could see that the Dursley’s (excluding Dudley who was back in front of the television) were sitting in the kitchen having tea, heading back to the trunk he yanked out the last piece of luggage and started to pull it into the house, pulling up the handle he paused. He could feel eyes drilling into the back of his head. Turning around and looking behind him he fingered the wand in his pocket, casting his eyes over the yard he saw nothing but a couple of the neighbors talking, a few bushes, and a cat, taking a double-take he looked closer at the cat;

It was a small tabby, it sat unusually stiff on a garden wall, its green eyes fierce with strange markings around them, “*McGonagall*” biting back the urge to glare at her he squared his shoulders and went to put the suitcase away. Throwing it in with the others he finally made it into his room, fully intending on throwing himself into bed, opening the door he was enveloped in heat, “*Oh yeah, Freaks don’t need air conditioning*” groaning he pulled off his shirt and threw it in the general

direction of his desk, jumping at the sound of an indignant squawk, pulling his wand out of his pocket he pointed it at the origin of the sound. A regal looking Raven was perched on his desk, glaring at him impatiently, a worn letter clutched in it's talons, slowly making his way to the bird he hesitantly lowered his wand as it lifted its leg to give him the letter, taking the worn parchment from the bird he noticed it wore a sort of metal collar but instead of a name tag it had a pendant. The pendant held a crest, the crest was of a crossed dagger and wand, the wand emitting a star and another star on the hilt of the dagger, and a banner surrounding them, it read:

Amplus. Castimonia. Dominatus.

Knowing nothing of Latin he couldn't make out what it meant. Once he received the letter from the Raven it took flight, after watching the bird disappear into the horizon he turned the envelope over in his hand noticing it held the same seal as the bird wore around its neck, he sat down on his bed and with a slow breath he broke the seal.

His breath caught in his throat when he saw the familiar scrawl, "Sirius"

Dear Harry,

I really don't know what to say...I don't even know why I'm writing this. I've been sitting in my room at headquarters staring at this piece of parchment for the past two hours, I don't know why but I don't think that I'll survive this war. I feel it in my gut kid, my time is up...Listen to me! I sound like Trelawney. Look Harry, if I'm really going to be dead soon there's some things I need to say to you. Don't let Dumbledore control you! Yes he is a great wizard but he is not a god! He isn't an evil man, he truly believes everything he does is in your best interest or the best for the wizarding world but you need to remember that he doesn't have any power over you, his is not your guardian. I know you have the weight of the world on your shoulders but damn! You're a teenager! You should be out getting drunk and chasing girls! Not fighting for your life at every turn, not forced to be everyone's savior!

Okay, now that that's out of the way...I know you Harry, I know you've probably been blaming yourself for my death (you have no idea how weird it is to say that) but IT ISN'T YOUR FAULT! If you didn't raise your wand and kill me yourself it was not your fault. Hopefully I go out in a barrage of spell fire fighting for those I love. Now there is one more thing I need to tell you, I left half of all the black fortune to you (the other half goes to Moony), now I know I should tell you something like "Spend it wisely, don't waste it on frivolous things" but you know what? I want you to blow it all! Though I doubt you can I want you to try extremely hard! I want you to buy any and everything you want, I want you to spoil yourself rotten! Consider that my last wish.

I need you to know that I love you, I love you and I always have.

Act like a kid, be stupid and impulsive. You've earned the right.

Your loving, kind, handsome, sweet, gorgeous, caring, beautiful, and most wonderful godfather

-Sirius Black

He was staring at the letter, laughter coming out of his mouth and tears running down his face, for the first time since Sirius's death he felt happiness, for the first time the crushing weight of guilt and anger seemed to be lifted from his shoulders. Wiping the tears from his eyes a genuine smile lit his face, "*He's right*" Pulling himself out of bed he strode to his wardrobe mirror, staring at the boy in front of him "*I need to take control over my life*".

There's going to be a new Harry Potter, Dumbledore won't know what hit him.

Chapter 5

The week passed at a snails pace, with Marge in the house Harry tried to spend as much time as possible in his bedroom though that rarely worked as the woman insisted on having him around for her “entertainment” which really just consisted of her insulting him and his parents or comparing him to Dudley. He spent all the time he got to himself reading his mom’s song book and practicing his guitar, every one of her songs were beautiful, she wrote everything from love songs to songs of sadness and heartbreak. Reading her songs and playing her music he felt for the first time he actually knew his mother, for what had to be the first time he was actually enjoying himself at the Dursley’s, the only time he’d actually been able to relax and have fun during the summer was when he was at the Burrow with Ron, the smile faded from his face as he thought of his friends, they hadn’t even bothered to write him! Yeah it was only the first week of summer but by now they’d usually have written him at least once. Pushing the thought from his head he tried to bring his focus back to the instrument in his hands but was interrupted by a plume of flame appearing on his pillow, grabbing his wand he threw himself to the floor, ready to start throwing spells at whatever was coming, a musical trill filled his room and he was instantly calmed, “*Fawkes*” lifting himself off the floor he stared at the brightly colored bird who was peering up at him with a look of amusement

He reached out and stroked the Phoenix’s soft plumage “You gave me a right scare Fawkes” giving him another trill the bird tossed it’s head and a letter appeared in his beak. Spotting the familiar Hogwarts crest on the letter his lips thinned

“Dumbledore’s got another message for me, eh?” Once he took the letter from the bird Fawkes gave him one last calming note then disappeared in a flash of fire, glaring at the letter in his hand he wondered if he should just throw it out the window, “*He’d probably just send me ten more*” he considered with a snort, tearing it open he forced himself to read it.

Mr. Potter,

I have no doubt that you plan on attending the will reading of Sirius Black tomorrow and You know that there is no way that I can allow that. There will be Order members stationed outside of your home to make sure you stay there, I'm sorry Harry but you leave me no choice.

Albus Dumbledore.

"That meddling son of a-!" If he was angry at Dumbledore before he was absolutely furious now *"He is taking this to far!"* Tearing the letter up he threw the scraps out of the window, *I can't believe he's doing this! I don't care what he says I'm going* he was fully intending on completely disregarding Dumbledore and going until he remembered something *"The Order will be here keeping watch over me"* stopping his pacing he sat back on his bed *"Invisibility Cloak? No, Mad-Eye will see right through that...How can I get out of here undetected?"*

"BOY! GET DOWN HERE AND HELP WITH DINNER!" sighing he forced himself to walk down the stairs, walking into the kitchen he proceeded to chop the carrots Aunt Petunia shoved into his hands. The repetitiveness of chopping the vegetables gave him time to think, *"I'll never get out of here tomorrow!"*

"Look at that glazed look in that boy's eyes! Those are the eyes of a psycho killer, you should take that knife from him" Marge "whispered" to his relatives, *"If that's true you'd be the first to go"*. Forcing the food down his throat he continued to think on his "predicament", he nearly choked on a piece of undercooked potato when the perfect plan entered his mind. Quickly shoveling down the rest of his meager meal he sprinted up the stairs before any of the Dursley's had the chance to order him to do something, sitting in his chair he started to fine tune his plan.

Glancing at his clock one last time (9:45pm) he pressed his ear against the wall, making sure the Dursley's were indeed asleep, pushing the doubt out of his mind he pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and as quietly as possible he made his way down the stairs. Letting himself outside, wincing at the creak the door made, he made his way in the dark down the sidewalk and to the corner.

Pulling his wand out of his pocket he held it up and the Knight Bus appeared with a bang in front of him.

"Ello Harry!" Stan greeted him "Hey Ern! It's Harry!"

"Hey Stan" Harry replied with a smile. Replacing his wand he made to step onto the bus when a hand landed on his shoulder.

"And where do you think you're going Harry?" a feminine voice asked him, wincing he turned himself around and looked straight into the face of Nymphadora Tonks.

"Hey Tonks" he grinned at her, quickly trying to think up a plausible excuse.

"Don't "Hey Tonks" me Harry Potter!" she snarled at him, glaring at him through violet eyes, her hair turning black. "You know Dumbledore said you aren't to go to Sirius's reading! It isn't safe!"

"I know! I'm not going, I was just heading to Gringott's to tell them I need a representative, maybe pick a few things while I'm there" her eyes narrowed

"You know you could have just owled them and they would have gotten you one"

"I know but as I said there are a few things I need to pick up" he said vaguely "and plus it won't be to unsafe if I had a beautiful and talented Auror accompanying me will it?" he said, tilting his head and letting a grin fill his face. She stared at him in shock for a couple of seconds then burst into giggles, her hair changing back to its usual pink spikes

"Are you trying to charm me Mister Potter?" he blushed sheepishly. Still giggling she looped her arm through his, "Well it worked! Where are we going?"

"Err, Diagon Alley"

"Alrighty!" Paying Stan who watched them both bewilderedly, she pulled him onto a cot

“Now, tell me truthfully, what is it that you’re really planning on doing in Diagon Alley?”

“Well first I’m going to Gringott’s to get a representative and get some of my gold transferred into muggle money, get a few books, and whatever else I feel the need to have” He replied

“Going on a bit of a shopping spree are you?”

“A bit of one” he smirked at her.

It only took them a couple of minutes to get to Diagon Alley; stepping off the bus they were getting quite a few strange looks, Harry flattened his hair and pulled his hood lower over his eyes.

“Whoops, I forgot” Tonks said from next to him, she shut her eyes in concentration and her hair changed from its usual short pink spikes to long golden blonde curls, her cheekbones became higher, her lips becoming fuller, and a smattering of freckles appeared on the bridge of her nose. Opening her now pale green eyes she smirked at his stunned face.

Twining her arms around his neck she whispered in his ear “Well come on Harry, I thought you were going to show me around?” Giving him a flirty wink, Harry could feel the heat rushing to his face

“Err, well...” *“What is she doing?!”* She burst into laughter, dropping her arms from around him

“You’re so easy Harry” still giggling she grabbed his arm and proceeded to pull him to Gringott’s. Getting over him momentary embarrassment he grinned at her

“That was mean, playing with a poor teenage boy’s heart like that”

“Aww, did I hurt poor little Harry’s feelings?” They made it to Gringott’s laughing and joking the entire way. Stepping into the building Harry stepped up to the first empty desk he could find, a goblin sat counting and weighing stacks of gold coins, Tonks quickly stepped behind him.

“Um, Excuse me?” the goblin looked up from his task

“Yes?” the gruff voice asked him

“I need to make a withdrawal from my account and I need to speak with Thicklock about a representative”

“Key please” Harry quickly fished in his pocket for his key and handed it to the goblin. He turned around and called (“Buckhook!) A second, obviously lower ranked, goblin and handed him the key.

“You will not be speaking to Thicklock Mr. Potter. He is the president of this bank, he does not have time to deal with such small matters. A representative will be appointed to you.” He turned back to his coins and Buckhook beckoned them to him. Glaring at the first goblin Harry and Tonks followed the second to the carts and sat in the one and they were off

“Why were you hiding?” Harry yelled to Tonks over the sound of the wind rushing around them, she mumbled something indistinct

“What?” he questioned, raising her voice she replied

“I said...Goblins scare me” there was a moment of silence between them until Harry by bursting into laughter

“It’s not funny Harry!” Still fighting down the giggles they made it to his vault. He stood there gaping for a good five minutes before Tonks prodded him in the back, his vault was a considerably larger, about the size of the Great Hall and filled to the brink with gold.

He turned to the goblin “Err, where did the rest of this come from?”

Buckhook snapped his finger and a scroll appeared in his hand, unrolling it he peered at it “A portion of it is from the Black family vault, another portion is from the Potter family vault, and the rest is from a series of deposits from “Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.” Rolling the scroll back up and snapping his fingers again the scroll disappeared. *“So it’s what Sirius left me, what was already here, and some from the Weasley’s?”* Taking a small bag from the goblin he started to fill it

with coins, he put the bag in his pocket and they went back to the cart, just as he went to step into the cart he remembered something else

“Excuse me, Buckhook?” the goblin turned his eyes to him “Can I exchange my wizarding money for muggle?”

“Yes” Harry went back into his vault and started to fill his bag again

“Mr. Potter, may I make a small suggestion?” Buckhook said

“Of course”

“I see that you are taking a rather large amount of money, when you exchange wizarding and muggle money you will get more muggle currency. I don’t advise carrying so much money at one time.” He once again snapped his fingers and a small black card appeared in his hand

“Gringott’s had made a new system” he handed the card to Harry, it looked just like a black American Express card except instead of their logo it held the Gringott’s crest.

“This is the Gringott’s charge card. It works the same as a muggle “Credit Card”, you can use it in both the wizarding and muggle world. It will take the money directly from you Gringott’s vault.”

Tonks grabbed the card from his hand “Oooh, you should get one Harry”

“I should, I’d like to have one of these Buckhook”

The goblin snapped his fingers again and the card vanished from Tonk’s hand “Of course Mr. Potter” after Harry replaced to money he had in his bag they climbed back into the cart and made their way back to the lobby of Gringot’s. Buckhook led them back to the desk of the first goblin, gave them a nod and disappeared through a small door.

Still counting his gold he seemed quite irritated by their presence “What do you need now?” the older goblin growled at them

Forcing himself not to get irritated with the goblin he answered "I was advised by Buckhook that I am able to have a Gringott's Charge Card?"

"Yes, you are" he pulled a stack of parchment from under his desk and slid it to Harry "Sign these" a large quill materialized in Harry's hand and he signed the documents. When he was finished the papers vanished and he was handed a black card similar to the one he saw earlier, except this one had his name on it. Sliding it into his pocket he thanked the goblin and got a grunt in reply.

"Friendly fellow isn't he?" Tonks whispered nervously in his ear

She checked her watch, a bright green thing with a big yellow smiley face on the face of the watch that winked and blew kisses. "We really need to hurry Harry, is after ten and the stores close at twelve"

They spent the next two hours shopping. First they went to Madame Maxine's and bought him robes, everyday robes, dress robes, winter cloaks, everything you could think of! If there was one thing he'd remember from this trip is to never take an over excited woman shopping. After having Tonks shrink all his robes which he stuffed in his pocket they went into Flourish & Blott's, He wandered around the store grabbing any book that caught his eye. "The Beginner's Guide to Occumency", "Defense and Offence with Household Charms", "Advanced Defensive Magic", he continued buying books along this vein.

It was nearly 1 am when they decided to leave, Tonks was just about to raise her wand to call the Knight Bus when Harry spotted a small shop tucked next to the Leaky Cauldron, "Tristan & Family Custom Trunks" it was the only place still open on the dark and deserted street.

"Hey, hold on a bit Tonks" he said grabbing her wrist "can we go in there for a sec?"

"Harry" she groaned "It's late, I'm tired, and you shouldn't even be here!"

“Come on, it’ll only take a second” he didn’t wait for her reply, he started across the street and into the shop, he could hear Tonks grumbling behind him.

The door opened with a soft jingle, the small room was lit by floating candles and a fireplace was roaring in a corner, the walls were filled with stacks of trunks in all shapes and sizes. Harry walked up to the deserted counter, a small gold bell was sitting in the middle of it. Not knowing what to expect he rung the bell, instead of the soft ring he expected to hear there was instead a huge GONG!

Both he and Tonks jumped at least two feet in the air, drawing their wands in an instant. A tall thin man came walking out of a back door they hadn’t noticed before, he was wearing a pair of dirty faded jeans and an old white t-shirt, he had waist-length white hair pulled back into a braid, he had bright hazel eyes, and bushy white eyebrows.

He flashed them a friendly smile “Sorry ‘bout that” he said with a thick Irish accent

“I was finishin’ up another trunk. Hi, I’m Tristan, what can I do for ya?”

“Umm, yes actually” Harry said “I need a new trunk, what kind do you make exactly?”

“Well we make ones with multiple compartments, Self-Shrinking, We can make them with unlimited space, we can do just about anything you want!” Nodding absent mindedly Harry walked toward a row of trunks, running his fingers over them until he came to a stop in front of a large black one with huge gold latches, it was rather plain but he liked it.

“I kind of like this one” he called over his shoulder, Tristan came to stand next to him.

“Good choice, this one has multiple compartments, and a self shrinking charm. If ya

Tap it with your wand ‘ere it’ll automatically shrink to matchbook size.” The man flicked his wand at the trunk and it floated off of the shelf, he walked back to the counter, Harry and the trunk following behind him,

“Do ya want somethin extra?”

“Like what?” Harry asked

“Well colors, security charms...I don’t know”

“Err...could you line the rest of the case with the same gold, and line the inside with red velvet?”

“Sure mate, it’ll take a few days to get it all done but when it is I can send it to you” he pulled out a piece of parchment and handed it to Harry.

“If ya fill this in, ya know your address and all that, I can get started” Harry filled out the form while Tristan added up his purchase, he handed the form back to the older man along with his card. After paying him they shook hands and Harry pulled the half asleep Tonks out of one of the chairs by the fire and they made to leave.

“You should get your trunk in a few weeks Mr. Potter!” Tristan shouted from behind him. Smiling his thanks Harry and Tonks stepped outside, called the Knight Bus and in less that a minute they were back on Privet Drive. After having Tonks unshrink his belongings he said goodnight to her, snuck back into the Dursley’s and hid his things. He was barley awake enough to pull on his pajamas, he threw himself into bed already making plans for tomorrow.

A/N: This chapter was a bit boring but the next one will defiantly have more of the guitar. I promise next chapter will include Ron and Hermione!

Chapter 6

He was running,

He could feel the hot white sand under his feet and taste the salty air on his tongue. He didn't know what he was running to but everything in him told him to keep going,

That he couldn't stop no matter what.

Finally he started to slow down, a few feet in front of him with her back to him stood a woman.

Long brown curls fell gently down her back, teased by the soft wind, and a long white dress floated around her bare feet. When he had made it to her he hesitantly reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder, she turned to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He lifted her chin; deep chocolate brown eyes met his emerald green, a soft smile decorated her face. She lifted herself on her toes, her eyes sliding closed, and leaned towards him.

Harry jerked awake, nearly falling out of bed, “*Holy hell! Was I just dreaming of Hermione?!*” Groaning he laid back down and pulled his pillow over his head “*Why would I be dreaming of Hermione? She's my best friend!*” Trying to push the image of her soft lips out of his mind he pulled the pillow from his head.

Glancing at his clock he noticed he had a couple of hours before the bus passed and he could leave, grabbing a shirt, some jeans and his worn shoes he headed for the bathroom and took a shower.

Stepping out the shower he wiped the fog from the mirror and peered at his reflection, his hair was a lot longer than it used to be, his bangs nearly touching his nose, his face was losing the boyishness, he cheekbones higher, and his lips fuller, “*I'm starting to look like my Mom!*” a grin filled his face at the thought, still grinning he went downstairs to get an early start on breakfast, the usual twenty pounds of bacon and enough eggs to feed an entire army.

The smell of food must have woken up the Dursley's because before he had even finished all the bacon they were at the table.

"What time do you want to leave Marge?" Vernon asked his sister

"Well we should be leaving as soon as possible, I need to get back to my dogs. One of the bitches is expecting pups" She answered. Harry had to stop himself from dancing at the thought of the woman finally leaving.

Quickly serving them Harry checked the clock over the door, surprised at how much time had passed already he headed towards the front door.

"Where are you going boy?" Aunt Petunia questioned him, her pale eyes narrowing

He opened the door "Out. I'll be gone for a few hours" not even sparing them a second glance he walked outside. He could still hear Aunt Marge bellow as he walked down the sidewalk.

"That boy has no respect for his betters!" he let out a snort "*Bettors my ass*".

Walking down the sidewalk he heard a rhythmic clunk, clunk behind him, when he stopped the clunking stopped. "*Mad-Eye*" he had almost forgotten about Dumbledore's little "Warning". Rolling his eyes he started to walk a bit faster.

Leaving Privet Drive and spotted the bus stop, the bus was already there and an old woman was getting on, a door closing behind him. Still hearing the clunking behind him he started to run, he could hear Moody let out a frustrated growl behind him, putting on a little extra speed he heard the clunking start to fade. He finally made it to the bus, making it in just as the door's closed.

He stepped on the bus and dropped a few coins in the slot. The bus was nearly empty, it was just him and an old woman who winked and blew kisses at him during the entire ride.

Sitting there his mind drifted back to his dream,

“What was that about? Hermione’s my best friend! I shouldn’t be thinking about her that way! I mean, yeah she’s beautiful, I’d be blind not to notice that, with those beautiful brown eyes, that soft curly hair, those full pouty red li- Oh god what am I thinking?! Bad, bad Harry!” he was still slapping himself in the head when the bus arrived at it’s destination, a blush crept onto his face when he saw the wary look the bus driver was giving him.

After the bus stopped at the shopping center both he and the old woman stepped off at the same time, he gave her a nod and turned to walk into the building when he felt a pinch on his bottom, quickly turning back around he spotted the old woman walking away throwing another wink over her shoulder.

Suppressing a shudder he pulled open one of the huge glass doors and strode inside the building, the cool air hitting him instantly, looking around at the multitudes of shops and people he was slightly overwhelmed, it was a lot to take in for a boy who hasn’t ever really shopped by himself, taking a deep breath he plunged into the milling crowd.

The first thing he figured he needed was some new clothes, he walked through a couple of stores but nothing really caught his eyes, he was just about ready to give up when he spotted a display window, the mannequins we dressed in finely tailored black suits and jeans, something about the clothes appealed to him. He walked into the shop, he stuck like sore thumb in his worn clothes and shaggy hair. A young woman walked up to him, she was dressed in a tight black suit, her dark red hair pulled into high ponytail, and her pale blue eyes glaring at him. She might have been quite good looking if her bright red lips weren’t pulled into such an ugly sneer.

“Welcome to the Armani Store, Can I help you?” she said in an obviously disgusted tone, her eyes straying from his hair to his shoes.

His eyes narrowed at her rude tone “Yes actually, I need to buy a few outfits”

Her sneered deepened “I’m sorry but you *must* be in the wrong place, the things here may be a bit out of your price range” glaring at her he

reached into his back pocket and pulled out his card, her eyes widened at the sight of it.

"You know what? I believe it is all *quite* within my price range but-"

"Of course, Sir!"

"*But!* I think I'll just take my business elsewhere" He turned on his heel and started to leave the store when he heard a different feminine voice from behind him

"Wait, Sir!" a younger girl ran up behind him, both her eyes and hair was the same as the woman but her hair was cut into a short pixie style and she was wearing khakis and a white button-up shirts with a black sweater pulled over it.. He turned around and waited for her to reach him.

Catching up to him she started to speak "I apologize for my sister, she can be a bit...rude sometimes" She smiled up at him

"Come back in and we'll get started on your shopping" glancing behind the girl he noticed her older sister had left the room.

He gave her a small smile "Sure" they walked back into the store

"So what is it exactly that you are looking for, sir?" she asked him "Oh and I'm Brita by the way" she was an incredibly bubbly girl, she was talking slightly fast and she had a very large smile.

"I'm Harry. I'm actually looking for just about everything really"

She rose her eyebrows at him "You mean like an entire new wardrobe?"

"Exactly" he said with a grin. She nodded seriously and pursed her lips

"Ok, here's what we'll do! We'll split up, we'll each pick a few outfits and meet at the changing rooms on 15 minutes, got it?!"

Starring at her a little weirdly he agreed “Err..yeah” Not really knowing what to do he walked toward a rack of pants and started going through them. He picked three pairs of dark jeans, a pair of black slacks, and two pairs of khakis. By the time he had finished deciding what he wanted 15 minutes had already passed and he could see Brita waiting at the changing rooms, grabbing his clothes he walked towards her.

His eyes grew huge when he saw the piles of clothes she had with her.

“You took all that time and that’s all you have?” she asked him, ignoring the shell shocked look on his face. Grabbing a pair of black trousers and a black button up shirt she handed them to him and shoved him into one of the stalls.

“Try this on” without even giving him a chance to reply she shut the door.

He stared at the clothing for a few seconds then let out a resigned sigh and started pulling off his jeans. When he finally stepped out of the changing room he could see Brita’s eyes widen and roam down his body, there was a slight awkward pause.

“Err...is it that bad?” he questioned. Her face quickly reddened.

“No! I mean....you, you look good!” she stammered at him. Rubbing his neck he thanked her, giving him another once-over she handed him another outfit.

“Ok, the one you have on now we will *definitely* be keeping. Try this one on” The next outfit was a tight fit, short sleeved, gray t-shirt with an embroidered horse on the front and the words “**Armani Jeans white horse on dragon hill**” embroidered on the left sleeve and one of the dark pairs of jeans he’d picked out earlier.

When he walked out again Brita let out a low whistle

“I’m liking you more and more Harry” instead of his usual blushing he gave her a smirk and a grin.

“Thank you. I do look good don’t I?”

They spent the next hour going through the piles of clothes, separating them into a Buy pile and a Never-In-A-Million-Years pile, once they figured out he didn’t look good in bright colors it was a whole lot easier.

“Ok Harry, I’ll take the “No’s” and put them away and you can take the things you’re buying up to the counter” Brita said

He let out a sigh of relief “So we’re finally done?”

“Of course not! I was saying you can bring your things to the counter and they’ll watch them for you until we’re finished. We still have formal wear and accessories to get to!” groaning he hefted the clothing and headed for the counter. A bored looking blonde guy was leaning against the counter; as soon as he saw Harry he bolted straight up and grinned at him.

“I don’t think anyone has ever come in here and bought so much” he said, helping Harry with his load of clothes. He spotted his name tag, it read Barry.

“I don’t think I’ve ever bought so much. Period” Harry replied, looking over his shoulder he saw Brita waiting impatiently for him “and apparently I’m not done yet. Do you think you could keep all this up here with you until I’m done?”

“Of course mate” thanking him Harry turned and walked towards the impatient girl

“Good luck!” Barry called from behind him. When he made it to her she grabbed his arm and dragged him to a room in the back of the store.

One wall of the room was completely covered in mirrors with black silk draped around them, there were rows and rows of fabric aligned on another, there were at least three dark wooden stools in the middle of the mahogany floor, and there were soft red and white lights hanging from the ceiling.

“Ok! Now, here is where we do custom suits for all our “Preferred Customers”, I think you count as one” she said to him. Still holding his arm she directed him to one of the stools.

“Alrighty, stay here and I’ll get our tailor. Oh! You should, you know strip down to your knickers” she said with a giggle “Our tailor doesn’t like excess fabric to interfere with his work.” Still giggling she walked out of a side door leaving him alone in the room, letting out what seemed like his ten-thousandth sigh of the day he started to pull off his clothes, *“I’m might as well walk around starkers for as many time as I had to take off my clothes today”*.

He heard the side door open just as he pulled off his pants, quickly turning around he saw a tall dark skinned man standing in the doorway.

“All you all done?” the man said to him, he had a very pronounced French accent. He was wearing a gray sweater and dark jeans.

“Um, yeah.” Harry answered and again for what seemed like the ten-thousandth time that day he blushed

“No need to be embarrassed dear boy!” He said with a smile, showing off white teeth. He had a very kind smile and he warm brown eyes and something about him instantly put Harry at ease.

The man clapped his hands “Now! I am Yves” he strode into the room, grabbed a measuring tape of a shelf, and turned sharply to stand directly in front of Harry.

“I shall show you the true importance of a good suit. It is more than simple fabric! More than a collection of stitches and silk! The perfect suit is *art!*” Continuing his speech he began to measure Harry’s arms. “I shall show you the beauty in a true Armani suit! The contemporary sense of elegance and sophistication are what *really* brings it all together” by now he had finished measuring and was holding swatches of fabric next to his skin.

It took three hours to finish all his measurements (during which Yves made sure to inform him on the art form that was tailoring) And to pick the colors and fabrics and when he was finally done Yves left for

him to get dressed then informed him it would take a couple of weeks before his suits were done. After thanking the man and assuring him he'd return to pick up his suits in two weeks he left the room, as soon as he stepped out he spotted Brita waiting for him

"Are we done now?" he asked

She gave him another one of her huge grins "Nope! We still have shoes, and jewelry, and" looking at his face she grimaced "some new glasses for you". Frowning slightly he touched his lenses, he hadn't even thought about his glasses. He once again followed her to another part of the store he picked up a pair of this black framed glasses, tried them on and turned to her with a raised eyebrow.

'Very nice! I think my good taste is already rubbing off on you!" snorting at her he picked up the glasses and a leather case he started to look for a watch, the first one that caught his eye was a black and silver number with a black and white dial, a thick black rubber band, and a brushed stainless steel case. The second one he saw was more of a formal looking one, it was completely stainless steel with a gunmetal gray dial he couldn't pick one so he just bought both of them. He also bought a pair of black dress shoes, a pair of dark sunglasses, a pair of black, orange, and white tennis shoes, and a black and silver leather messenger bag. He even grabbed a leather jacket, a dark blue hoodie, and a few pairs of silk pajamas.

"Ok Harry! I think we're all done" said Brita with a small smile

He let out a sigh of relief "Finally!" she pouted at him "I mean, it's been fun!".

Together they walked back to the front counter, Barry still standing there, and Harry handed him the rest of his purchases and he rung them up.

"You know Harry, you can put on some of your new clothes before you leave" Brita said eyeing what he was wearing, he had forgotten he was still wearing Dudley's old things.

Wincing slightly as he looked down at his outfit he agreed. Pulling out a pair of dark blue jeans, the gray shirt, the glasses, the sneakers,

and the hoodie, he went to one of the changing rooms and change clothes, slipping his old glasses into his back pocket. Brita grinned at him when he left the room and quickly grabbed the bundle of clothing out of his hand and threw them in a rubbish bin behind the counter.

"I've been wanting to do that all day" After taking the bags from Barry he said goodbye to him and Brita and finally left the store.

He was feeling hungry by the time he left the store so he headed to the food court, he almost made it in when he saw a hair salon.

He ran his hand through his hair, he *did* need a hair cut, giving one last longing glance at the food court behind him he opened the door and walked into the shop. As soon as he stepped in loud rock music flooded his ears, grimacing at thought of the last time he'd been in a hair salon he walked to a small desk where a boy about his age with shockingly bright blue hair done in spikes was sitting with his feet propped up on the desk and a phone to his ear.

"Excuse me" the boy held up one hand and continued to speak on the phone. He waited a couple of minutes, getting more and more irritated, the boy didn't seem to have any intention of getting off the phone any time soon.

Rolling his eyes Harry began to drum his fingers on the top of the desk, the guy looked up at him in annoyance but continued his conversation, finally hanging up the phone the boy glared up at him, he noticed that he was wearing electric blue contacts.

"Can I help you?" he asked

Quitting his tapping he answered the boy "Yes actually, I need a haircut"

"You sure do mate" he said with a snicker. He spun his chair around and picked up a small red notebook "Let me see who's free".

"I mean, I don't know *what* you were thinking with that cut but my god it looks like a birds nest!" Flipping through the book he continued to speak, seemingly oblivious to the glare Harry had aimed at him.

“Ah! You’re lucky, Mahrie just had a cancellation” he exclaimed.

Standing up he directed Harry to follow him, he led him to one of the black and silver leather chairs and informed him that his hairdresser would be with him shortly.

Waiting there he took notice of the room, the walls were painted in a deep red and the floors done in black tile, huge mirrors decorated a wall surrounded by small white bulbs.

In the mirror he saw a young woman walk up behind him, she wore her hair in short brown layers and she had soft hazel eyes.

“Hello” she spoke in a soft voice “I’m Mahrie, I’ll be your hairdresser today”

He gave her a half smile “Hi, I’m Harry. Nice to meet you”. Smiling at him she picked up a black poncho kind of thing and wrapped it around him.

“Now, is there something in particular you want done?” she asked

“Um, not really. I’ve never really spent too much time on my hair”

She laughed slightly “I can tell”. He couldn’t help but grin

“How about we just give it a wash and see where it goes from there, sounds good?”

“Sure” he shrugged, putting his glasses into his jacket pocket. She took him over to a row of sinks and washed his hair, after the wash she took him back to the chair and pulled out a pair of scissors. He eyed them warily.

“Don’t worry love, I won’t mess you up to bad” Giving him a slightly evil grin she began to cut, he felt slightly ill watching his hair fall to the floor. Putting down the scissors she brushed off his shoulders and brought him back to the sinks and washed his hair again.

“That’s a pretty wicked scar there Harry” she said “Where’d you get it?”

“Err, well I got it in a car accident when my parents died when I was a baby” she let out a gasp and covered her mouth with her hands.

“Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean...”

“No, no! It’s okay, really” he said “How would you have known?” nodding at him she continued her work.

Towel drying his hair they walked back to the chair, putting a small amount of gel in her hands she massaged it through his hair then fluffed it slightly with her fingers. Wiping her hand on a towel she stepped back and turned his chair towards the mirror

“What do you think?” she asked him. He leaned forward. His hair was shorter, only about 2 inches and you could see his scar quite plainly, his hair was slightly spiked and went into all different directions, the cut brought out his cheekbones and accentuated his brow.

He grinned “I like it”

“I figured you would” she said with a smile “Now put on your glasses” shrugging he pulled them out off his pocket and slid them on his face.

“Gorgeous! I’m really good at this” She smiled a full grin “You know what you need though?” she asked, that evil grin returning with a vengeance “A piercing! We do those here”

He stared at her in horror “What? No way!”

“Oh come one! You’d look great with one!” she pouted at him, her eyes twinkling in mischief .

After thanking her he walked back to the desk at the front of the salon, a brand new silver stud in his eyebrow and truthfully he did like the way he looked with it.

The boy was still there and when he saw Harry he stood up and started to clap

“Very nice! That’s so much better!” rolling his eyes at him he handed him his card.

“Could you please add a tip for Mahrie please?” he asked him

“Sure thing”. After getting his card back he left the shop and went to get something to eat.

Once he finished eating he got ready to leave, before leaving he stopped at another store. He went to a second clothing store and bought a few more t-shirts some more shoes, and a second pair of glasses with thin silver frames, he even found a small leather journal he could use to write songs. He tried to do it as fast as possible because the sales girl would not stop following him around, flirting with him, and make comments about his err...anatomy.

Finally making it out of the shopping center he stopped at a pay phone and called a cab, after the cab pulled up in front of the Dursley's he paid the driver, grabbed his shopping bags and started up the stairs.

“Psst! Harry!” he heard from the bushes, *“Why don't they ever hide somewhere other than the bushes?”*

Letting out a sigh he put down his bags and walked to the shrubbery and pushed back the leaves.

“Wotcher Harry!” Tonks smiled up at him for the ground, her hair lime green today and her eyes light blue “You went shopping without me?”

“Hey Tonks, I just needed a few more things” he said “Could you do me a favor?”

She stood up, putting the cloak over her arm. “Sure Harry”

“Can you shrink this stuff for me? I'd rather not have the Dursley's see it and try to take it” nodding she whipped out her wand and waved it over his bags, he watched as they shrunk to the size of matchboxes.

“Thanks! I'll see you later Tonks!” he turned back to his bags.

“Wait a minute Harry! Come back here” giving her a bewildered look he turned back around and stood in front of her.

“Did you get a haircut?!”

She reached up and grabbed his face. “What is that?! It that a piercing?!” a grin forming on her face

“Yeah, it came with the haircut” he said, returning her grin

“It looks good on you” she took a step back and looked him up and down, and let out a low whistle.

“It’s not the only thing that looks good on you” rolling his eyes a blush rushed to his face.

“Err, how will I unshrink them?” he asked

She slapped a hand to her head “Oh! Sorry ‘bout that” taking out her wand again she muttered something and a blue light engulfed his bags.

“Now you can just tap it with your wand and they’ll go back to original size”

“Alright, thanks Tonks” he scooped them up and slipped them into his jacket pocket.

She pulled the cloak back on and he felt a something push him. “Go in the house Harry” he heard Tonks say. Nodding in the general direction of her voice he walked back up the stairs and got a spare key from under the welcome mat and unlocked the door, replacing the key he walked in.

“WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN BOY?!” Uncle Vernon was standing directly in front of him, spittle flying out of his mouth and his breath hitting Harry full on in the face.

“I told you I was going out and that I’d be gone for a few hours.” Uncle Vernon’s face changed from red to purple, “*Looks like I really pissed him off*” a smile trying to fight its way to his face at the thought.

“WHAT ARE YOU SMIRKING AT BOY? And where did you get that outfit from?! YOU’VE BEEN STEALING HAVEN’T YOU?!” letting out

a snort Harry walked around the man and started to go up the stairs but Vernon grabbed his arm.

“What is that in your face?! What will the neighbors think? TAKE IT OUT! Take it out right now!” Harry wrenched his arm out of Vernon’s grip and turned to glare at him.

“One: Don’t. Ever. Touch. Me.” He started “Two: I don’t steal, I bought this with *my* money. And Three: I do what ever the hell I want, I *pierce* whatever the hell I want, and *you* sure as hell have no control over me.” There was complete silence when he finished his speech, Vernon’s mouth was hanging open and behind him Harry could see the rest of his “family” in the living room peering through the door in shock. Giving them one last glare he turned around and went to his room.

Chapter 7

Slamming the door behind him Harry leaned against it, breathing carefully through his mouth, *"I have got to get out of this house!"*.

Pushing himself off the door he pulled out his bags and placed them on his desk, pulling out his wand he went to unshrink his belongings when he noticed a letter from Gringotts.

He stared at it, sitting there innocently on his old desk, he knew what it was, it was the letter from his representative. Licking his lips he picked up the letter and broke the seal, sliding out the piece of parchment.

Mr. H. Potter,

I must once again offer my condolences on the death of Sirius Black.

I am Griphook, the representative selected for you by Gringotts bank. Here is a list of assets left to you by Mr. Black.

Estates:

The Black Family Manor, London

Monetary and Possessions:

800, 0000 in Galleons,

Flying Motorbike

The possessions and property of Mr. Black will be added to the assets that you already own which is listed below.

Estates:

Godric's Hollow, London

The Potter Manor, France

The Potter Family Cottage, Scotland

Monetary and Possessions:

945, 0000 in Galleons

8, 0000 in Various Family Heirlooms

If you'd like any more information feel free to owl me or visit me at Gringotts.

Griphook,

Gringotts Bank

He stared at the letter in shock, what would he do with all that money?! And a motorcycle! Shaking his head slightly he put the letter back in the envelope and put it back on the desk. Pulling out his wand he enlarged his shopping bags and put them in his wardrobe after pulling out a pair of black silk pajamas, closing the wardrobe door he pulled on a pair of black silk pajamas and made to lay down in bed until he heard a bang at the door, letting out a groan he pulled himself out of the bed and back to the door. Yanking it open he came face to face with his Aunt Petunia. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Boy" she said "You are not to leave this room unless we come for you, and you are to give me all the clothes you bought" he stared at her in shock for a moment then he started to get angry, "*Who are they to think they can demand **anything** from me?!*"

"Excuse me?" his voice got cold "And why would I do that?"

Her eyes narrowed "Look here boy, when you are in this house you will obey our rules! Do you think we'd just let you get away with that disrespect you showed Vernon today?! Now give me the clothes!"

His hands balled into fists "No" he slammed the door in her face and locked it behind him. Less than two minutes later Vernon was pounding on his door.

“Get out here now boy! If you don’t give me that stuff now you are out of this house! I don’t give a damn what those freaks say!” absolutely furious Harry yelled back through the door.

“You know what?! I don’t give a damn either! I’ll leave happily!” grabbing his trunk from under his bed Harry pulled out all the clothes from Dudley and threw them on the floor then pulled his new clothes out of the wardrobe and threw them into the trunk, then pulled out his leather messenger bag. After putting on the clothes he had on earlier he grabbed all the things from the loose floor board and stuck them in his bag and dumping everything on his desk in his trunk and closed it, stuffing his Gringotts letter into his, he could hear Vernon and his brood still banging on his door.

Tucking Hedwig’s empty cage (as she had been gone for a few days) under his arm he was about to walk out the door when he remembered something else, putting the things in his arms back down he got on his stomach and scooted under his bed and pulled out his Mum’s guitar, “*I can’t believe I almost forgot it*”, grabbing his things again he yanked open the door and pushed Vernon and Petunia aside. He was halfway down the stairs when the guitar was ripped out of his hands, swinging around he saw Vernon holding it.

“How did you get this?!” Petunia yelled at him, her face pale with fury “How dare you steal things from me!”

He could hear the blood rushing through his veins, his vision was taking on a tinge of red. “Steal from you?! This is *my* Mother’s! You have no right to it!” he yelled back at her, he dropped his trunk and Hedwig’s cage which slid the rest of the way down the steps he went to charge Vernon, he almost had him but he reached out a beefy arm and slapped Harry hard across the face and he hit the wall. Harry reached a shaky hand to his cheek, looking down at his fingers he saw blood. His eyes narrowed, he all of a sudden felt cold, he reached in one of his pockets and pulled out his wand.

“You w-wouldn’t dare boy! They’d kick you out of that freak school!” Uncle Vernon stammered at him.

"You're right" Harry said and he lowered the thin piece of wood. He looked over at his relatives who paled at the look on his face. His usual emerald green eyes had changed to a deep near black green.

The guitar flew into his hands, holding it he turned his eyes to Vernon who made to take a step back but instead he flew into the wall, Petunia screamed and ran to her stunned husband's side.

Taking one last look at his cowering guardians Harry ran down the stairs and to the door, barely taking noticed of Dudley who was trying to hide his bulk behind Uncle Vernon's armchair, the front door flew open and he sprinted out, his trunk and Hedwig's cage floating behind him.

Before he knew it he was standing in the middle of the sidewalk. *"What did I just do?!"* he dropped onto the ground, *"I don't have anywhere to go! Damn it! I just used magic!"* groaning he dropped his head into his hands, the gravity of the situation hitting him. He was alone outside in the dark, and he had nowhere to go. *"What do I do? Write Dumbledore? No! That meddling old fool would send me right back to this hell hole! I have to get out of here! The ministry will be here soon."* It was getting cold so he stuffed his hands in his pockets to try to keep them warm when his fingers came in contact with the Gringotts letter, pulling it out he had an idea.

He pulled his hood lower, trying to shield his face and continued walking to the huge white building at the end of the street. Entering the bank he walked to the middle desk and waited for the Goblin to notice him.

He finally looked up "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm Harry Potter and I need to speak to Griphook" The goblin eyed his suspiciously

"Key"

"Oh, sure" Harry reached in his leather bag for his key he pushed aside the trunk he had Stan shrink and grabbed his key and slid it across the desk, the goblin picked it up and turned it over in his hand then handed it back to Harry.

“Wait here Mr. Potter” he said and left abruptly, leaving Harry standing at his desk.

A few minutes later he returned with another, younger Goblin who gave him a smile, or what you could guess was a smile from a goblin, and beckoned Harry towards him.

“Welcome Mr. Potter” he said “I have to say I didn’t expect to see you so soon”

Harry followed the goblin out of a small door and down a dark stone corridor lighted by torches on the wall.

“I didn’t expect to either Griphook but I need a little help” By now they had stopped in front of a large black marble door, Griphook waved his hand at the door and it swung open to reveal a large office, huge bookshelves surrounded the entire room and a huge fireplace sat in the middle of the room.

“I’ll be happy to help in any way I can” They walked into the office, Griphook directing him to a slightly uncomfortable wooden chair at the desk and sat in a rather large chair across from him.

“Now what can I do for you Mr. Potter?”

Harry pulled the letter out of his pocket and laid it on the table “I wanted to ask you about these properties”

“What is it that you need to know?”

“I need to know the exact location of this one” he said, pointing to one of the homes. The goblin nodded at him then waved his hand at one of the bookshelves against the wall and a brown leather book floated over to him, placing it on the desk Harry saw the name imprinted on the cover, **Potter**.

Opening it up Griphook flipped through the book until he found a page in the middle, he grabbed the edge of the page and pulled, a map unfurled out onto the desk and both Harry and the goblin leaned over it. Griphook placed a wrinkly finger on a small red dot.

"It's right here" Tapping the dot the area enlarged and he could see a picture of a rather large house with curvy writing under it, ***The Potter Family Cottage.***

"The cottage is right next to a muggle village named Saoirse Glen" said Griphook "and it's protected by the fidelus charm. It's been abandoned since the death of your grandparents but I think there are still three house-elves living there."

"How can I get there?" asked Harry

The goblin pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill and proceeded to write something as he answered the question.

"Well I'm sure that it is connected to the floo network but that's next to useless with the charm on the building. I know that your grandparents usually took a muggle train, quite strange for a pureblood family but that's the only way they'd go." He put the parchment on the table and then ran his fingers over it, it glowed red for a few seconds. When it stopped glowing he handed the parchment to Harry.

"This is a portkey. When you're ready just hold it in your hand and say the address written on here, you'll be transported about a mile out of the village." Nodding he slipped the piece of paper in his pocket.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" Griphook asked. A slow grin formed on Harry's face.

"Yes actually. Where is the motorcycle being kept?"

"It is more than likely in one of your family vaults"

"Good, I can get it after our meeting"

"Of course but if you'd like to save some time I can send someone to retrieve it for you" Harry agreed. Griphook stood from his desk and snapped his fingers, a goblin popped into the room.

"Go to the Potter family vault and retrieve the enchanted motorbike" The goblin nodded and popped out of the room. Not two seconds

later he reappeared, a huge motorbike at his side. Harry drew in a sharp intake of breath. It was beautiful.

It was done in two-toned fire red, vivid black and shining chrome, the tires were laced with the chrome and it had a leather two-up seat. He stood from his chair and ran his hands over the sleek machine. He was interrupted out of his worshiping of the bike by the second goblin clearing his throat behind him. He turned to him with a sheepish smile. He handed Harry a palm sized book then popped out.

The Flying Motorbike: A Beginner's Guide.

"That was also left to you by Mr. Black" Griphook said from next to him. Harry gave him a sad smile and nodded.

"Now all I have to do is figure out how to carry it" he said. The goblin raised a bushy eyebrow at him.

"A...contraption of this sort" he said, giving the bike a disgusted look "usually has a self-shrinking feature"

"Oh" Slightly embarrassed at his lack of knowledge he opened the book in his hands and flipped to the table of contents, finding the correct page he quickly leafed to it.

"For shrinking press the yellow button right under the handlebars" Closing the book he slipped it in his bag. Reaching under the handlebars he found the button and pressed it. The bike seemed to crumble in on itself, instantly shrinking to the size of a child's toy. Bending down he picked it up, turning it over in his hand, *"Wicked"*.

Putting it in his bag he turned to Griphook.

"Is there anything else I can do for you Mr. Potter?"

"No" Harry stood up, the goblin standing also "but thank you for your help" Reaching out he shook Griphook's hand who gave him a slightly surprised look.

"I don't think a wizard has every willingly shook my hand" he said, Harry shrugged and gave him a small smile. The goblin led him back down the corridor and to the small door; Harry turned to him and looked his straight in the eye.

"Let's keep this conversation a secret, eh?"

The goblin gave him a solemn look "Of course Mr. Potter, here at Gringotts we treat out customers with complete confidentiality."

Bidding him farewell Harry walked through the door and out of the bank.

He tried to walk as quickly as possible without drawing attention to himself, there was no doubt in his mind that either the ministry or Dumbledore and his cronies were looking for him.

Before leaving he once again stopped at Tristan's. The bell above the door jingled when he came in and Tristan came out the back covered in sawdust.

"Hey! I didn't expect to see ya for a while" he exclaimed when he spotted Harry.

Shrugging he went to stand at the counter. "Yeah, I just thought I'd tell you I won't be able to receive the trunk at the address I gave you". The man squinted at him and brushed the debris off his shoulders.

"Oh, do ya have a different one I can send it to?"

"Um, not exactly...Is it possible for me to just come back in a few weeks and pick it up?"

"Of course mate! I should be done with it before ya have to head back to Hogwarts" Thanking the man he shook his hand and left. As soon as he walked out of the store he stepped into the narrow alleyway between it and the Leaky Cauldron, after glancing behind him he pulled out the piece of parchment.

"The Potter Family Cottage, Ainsley's Road, Scotland" He felt the familiar tug behind his navel and in seconds his vision was dissolved

into color. The next thing he knew he hit the ground flat on his arse, *"I hate Portkey's"* with a grunt he lifted himself off the soft grass beneath him. He was standing behind a line of large stone buildings, luckily there was no one else there.

He peeked around the corner of the building, seeing no one he opened his bag and pulled out the book and the motorbike, laying the bike on the ground he opened the book and leafed through it.

"For shrinking press the yellow button right under the handlebars. To return the bike to its original size simply tap it with your wand." Following the directions he resized the bike. According to the book there was a compartment under the seat that could fit anything he wanted in it, lifting the seat he took off his bag and put it in. When he reached in to put it away his hands met something hard and cool, slightly confused he pulled it out. It was a helmet. It was black with dark gray flames, and made full-face. Tucking it under one arm he opened the book again, *"I should probably know something about it before I try to ride it"*.

The bike was charmed to never crash and a beginner could easily drive, it could reach speeds of up to 350 miles per hour, to make it fly he pushed a blue button under the other handlebar, there was also a second helmet under the seat and driver and passenger could communicate through them. Putting the book away he put his helmet on and swung onto the bike, as soon as his fingers touched the handlebars warmth spread through his arms and to his body. A huge grin took over his face, he felt absolutely giddy, completely confident. Revving the engine he pulled out from behind the building and took off down the road and through the village, he could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, he felt complete freedom, *"This is almost better than flying"*. Once he was out of the village the roads were completely deserted, staring at the empty stretch before him he put on more speed, he let out a shout of pure joy, it had been such a long time since he was able to truly enjoy himself, to not feel the weight of his responsibilities on his shoulders, to finally just feel like a teenager.

He slowed down when he saw a white sign on the side of the road, ***Ainsley's Road***. Slowing down a bit more he turned down the narrow

dirt road, the entire road was lined with large oak trees, the branches hung above the road and creating a leafy canopy and casting a soft green light on the ground. The road progressively got wider and wider as he drove down it until it came to a stop at a towering brick wall with an imposing wrought iron gate. Both the wall and the gate were covered in white roses, and on each side of the gate stood huge weeping willows. He cut the engine on his bike and swung off, a complete silence surrounded him. Placing his helmet on the bike he walked to the gate, the crunch of his feet on the leaves on the ground echoing through the wood, he peered through the gate but all he could see was an empty field. Remembering what the goblin told him he reached in his back pocket and pulled out the slip of parchment, he stared at the address and committed it to memory, as soon as he looked back up and through the gate he gasped. It was *not* a cottage, mansion was more like it. It was a three-story high stone building, a long flower lined white brick path led to the four stone steps at the front, on each side of the steps two fierce looking stone dragons sat, and at the top of the steps there were two tall double dark wood doors surrounded in glass. There were two turrets in the front with windows that went from ground to roof and a balcony hung over the front door. He placed his hand on the gate and a sharp pain entered his index finger, jerking his hand from the gate he cradled it to his chest. "*What the hell?*" His finger was bleeding, he looked up from his injured hand and back at the gate and took a step back. The entire gate was pulsing with silver light, the light slowly faded and the gate swung open. Hesitantly he got back on his bike and rode down the path, the huge gates closing behind him.

Now that he was inside the gates he could fully see the true beauty of the cottage. The ground was completely covered with lush green grass dotted with white flowers, the lawn went on for acres and acres, and the vast brick fence was lined by large apple trees, he could even see a quidditch pitch peeking from behind the house.

He parked the motorbike on the side of the steps and walked up them, he went to reach out and open the door when it swung open by itself. Standing in the doorway was a house-elf. He was an old thing, with even more wrinkles than your average house-elf and great bushy gray eyebrows, he was (surprisingly) wearing a black tunic with a gold and black crest on the chest, a gold sash and gold leggings, and

he also had on black shoes with turned up toes and gold laces. His huge brown eyes if possible got even wider and his little hands flew to his face.

“Oh, little Master Potter! Yous has returned to reclaim your home!” he exclaimed, tears running down his face.

“Err, Hi?” Harry said looking down at the excited elf. There were two small pops and two more elves appeared next to the first one. They were another old elf, this time a female with a black dress with the crest and a white apron, the sash, and the shoes; the other elf was a younger male with an outfit to match the older male. The woman burst into tears and pulled Harry inside the mansion.

“Manny! Yous had our master standing on the steps like a commoner!” she snapped at the older male “Oh, little Master! Yous has gotten so big!” she said and wiped her large eyes with the edge of her apron. The younger male was still standing there, staring up at him with eyes wide in adoration. With a bit of confusion he looked down at the elves staring up at him.

“Hello, I’m sorry but have I met you all before?” he asked

“Why of course, young master! But you was just a wee little thing, you probably don’t remember” the one called Manny said to him. The woman nodded at him, her tears finally drying

“You used to come with your Mum and Da to visit the Master and the Mistress” a sad look came upon her face, tears filling her eyes again “Rest their souls... You was such a sweet little thing!”

“I wish I could remember it” he smiled at her “May I ask your names?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry! I should have introduced us!” she pointed to the young one “This is Molby, our son” she pointed to her mate “This is my mate, Manny” she blushed a bit and went back to twisting her apron “and I am DeeDi” he reached out and shook their hands.

“It is very nice to meet you! I am as I guess you know Harry, please call me Harry”

“Yes Master Harry” they said in unison. He winced slightly and looked up, finally noticing his surroundings and let out a slow whistle. He was in a vast hallway, completely flooded by sunlight. The walls were an extremely dark red trimmed in gold, the floors were mahogany and there were three huge gold chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. Directly in front of him were two huge mahogany spiral staircases. He stopped gapping for a second and turned back to the eager elves.

“Well, I’ll be staying here for a few months. Until school starts at least and maybe for the holidays...If that’s ok?” they nodded vigorously

“Would Master Harry like a tour?!” Molby said, practically trembling in excitement. He grinned down at the little elf, already forming a soft spot for him.

“Sure, why not?” he grabbed Harry’s hand and started to pull him down the hallway.

“We’ll start on dinner! We’ll make a feast in honor of Master Harry’s return!” DeeDi shouted behind them before both she and Manny popped away.

Later that night Harry threw himself into his large bed, it had been a tiring day. Molby had showed him every nook and cranny of the cottage and that’s saying a lot considering how **huge** the house was! The first room he showed him was the formal Dining Room, it had a long mahogany table surrounded by mahogany and red velvet chairs, and it had the same color scheme as the hallway but with one big gold chandelier. He then showed him the regular dining room which was done in light colors, the table was a small four person table made out of an extremely nearly white wood and light wood chairs with green cushions, the walls were painted white and pale green and one wall was completely made of glass. There were family rooms with roaring fireplaces and comfy couches, one of them even had a wall with pictures of his family, and Molby had to nearly drag him out. There were huge spa like bathrooms and comfortable studies, there was even a library. It was painted a lovely bright blue with dark wood floors and four fireplaces, there were windows with stain glass artwork of dragons and lions and every other animal you could think of, every wall was covered in bookcases and it had two floors. The chairs were

so comfortable he felt the urge to just sleep right in there, "*Hermione would love it*". He was about ready to just lay on the floor and sleep by the time they got to his room, it was an amazing room. The walls were dark green and the floors dark. There were five dark bookcases on one wall and there was a huge king sized bed in the middle of the room with an enormous black shag carpet under it, the bed was a four poster made in dark wood and dragons were carved around the posters. The blankets were black with green silk sheets and there were at least six dark green pillows on the bed and black velvet hangings hung around it. There was even a fireplace with two overstuffed dark green chairs in front of it and a large dark wooden wardrobe.

DeeDi must have gotten his things while Molby was showing him around because all of his clothes were hanging in the wardrobe and him Mum's guitar was on a shelf right next to his bed.

He was worn out and he knew he needed to sleep but he was still full of energy so he slid out of his outrageously comfortable bed and padded across the warm floor and pulled the guitar off it's shelf. Sitting back on his bed he freed the instrument from it's velvet lined case and let his fingers run over the chords, he could feel all the tension in his body leave him instantly and complete peace fell over him. Closing his eyes a song his mother had wrote came to his mind and he began to strum the chords.

Oh no, I see,
A spider web, it's tangled up with me,
And I lost my head,
The thought of all the stupid things I said,
Oh no what's this?
A spider web, and I'm caught in the middle,
So I turned to run,
The thought of all the stupid things I've done,

*I never meant to cause you trouble,
And I never meant to do you wrong,
And I, well if I ever caused you trouble,
O no, I never meant to do you harm.*

*Singing, I never meant to cause you trouble,
I never meant to do you wrong,
And I, well if I ever caused you trouble,
Although I never meant to do you harm.*

As the final notes faded from the room so did his voice, he gave a slight start. He hadn't realized that he'd been singing. He was just getting ready to start another song when he heard a hoot from one of his windows, his head snapped in the direction of the sound, his body instantly on alert but he relaxed when he saw it was Hedwig. Placing the guitar back in the case he jumped of his bed and raced to open the window, the instant the haggard bird flew in she descended on him, quite viciously nipping his ears.

“Yes, Master Harry?”

“Of course master! Your no need to apologize, I’m here to serve you!” with a snap of her fingers a dark wooden bird stand popped into existence in the corner of the room, he gently set Hedwig down on it. She hopped around on it for a couple of seconds then turned her amber eyes to him. She seemed to approve of it.

"Well even if that's is so thank you anyway" he said to the elf beside him. *"I don't think I'll ever get used to being called master"* "I just wish I could use magic myself" he muttered

The elf twisted her little fingers through he apron "But you can master!" she said. He furrowed his brows and looked at her.

"I'm still an underage wizard"

"Yes but this house is unplotable and full of magic! Which means the ministry can't detect under aged magic here and even if they could they wouldn't be able to find you" she said matter-of-factly. *"I bet Malfoy has been using magic for ages! How come no one told me this?!"* He turned back to DeeDi

"Thank you for informing me, you can go back to what you were doing now" she nodded and disappeared again. Harry turned back to hi owl and noticed for the first time that she had a letter tied to her leg. He walked over to her and she lifted her leg for him to untie it. As soon as he held it he recognized the neat script.

I shouldn't have listened Harry! I should have just wrote you but Dumbledore said not to write you, that you needed your time to grieve so Ron and I never wrote. Then you disappeared and no one knows where you are! This is all my fault. Things have gotten so horrible Harry!

My parents are dead. It happened last week, Deatheaters came and attacked us, I tried to hold them off Harry! But I was to weak. They died right in front of me and there wasn't anything I could do about it...all I could do was sit there and watch them suffer. The Order didn't even come to help us, they promised me parents that they would keep us safe but they didn't! they didn't even come after it was over. The muggle police came and now I'm in some sort of group home in Scotland! I'm alone and...I'm scared. I thought I was just going to lose my mind but then Hedwig came through the window! It was like she knew I need you...I don't know what to do Harry.

He was in shock. Hermione's parents were *dead*! Because of him, because she was his friend. All of a sudden an absolute fury rushed

through him, no one came for her?! They left her alone after something like that?! He grabbed his jacket and his shoes and swung his door open, he had to help her. Dumbledore was going to have hell to pay!

A/N: Hmm I didn't quite like that ending. The letter wasn't very good :P. Hermione will be in the next chapter!! The song was Trouble by Coldplay (most awesome band ever!)

Chapter 8

He sprinted down the stairs and the entrance hall, absolute rage pumping through his veins, *“How the hell could they just leave her?! Where was the damn order when you actually need them?!”* He was so caught up in his angry thoughts he almost tripped over Manny on his way out the door.

“Master Potter! Where is you going?!” he said. Harry stopped walking and stood in front of the old elf.

“Manny can you prepare a room for a friend of mine?” he said “She might be staying for a while” the wide eyed elf nodded at him. He turned on his heel and walked out the front door and to his bike which was still parked next to the steps. He made to swing on the bike when he realized he didn’t even know where she was! He let out a rather vicious curse and ran his finger through his hair. Manny, who he hadn’t noticed had followed him outside, tugged on his pants leg.

“May I ask what the problem is Master Harry?”

“I don’t know where she is and how to get her here!” the elf peered up at him for a second then gave a firm nod. He reached out a wrinkled hand.

“Take my hand young Master, I can take you to her” he said. Giving him a wary look Harry grabbed his hand.

“Now what is her name?”

“Hermione Granger”

“Okay, close your eyes Master. This will feel quite strange.” He said. Harry squeezed his eyes shut. It was nothing like a portkey, it felt like he was dissolving, his molecules scattering into a complete cold then all on a sudden he felt his feet hit the ground. Feeling slightly nauseas he cracked his eyes open and looked down at the smiling elf at his side. Giving him a shaky smile he let his little hand go and looked around him. He and his companion were standing in a dark hall, there was a threadbare rug under their feet and the walls were a

dingy off white and there were three doors on each side of the narrow hall.

He looked back down at Manny. "You sure she's here?"

"Yes, Master Harry" sighing he glanced back at the doors.

"You don't by any chance know which room she's in?" the elf shook his head. Sighing again he quietly paced to the first door and cracked it open, peering through it he saw four little boys sleeping in bunk beds. After closing it behind him he checked the door next to it which held four sleeping little girls, the one next to that was empty and the ones across from them had one room with five teenage boys and another with five teen girls. He was nearly ready to give up when he got to the last door, taking a deep breath he inched it open. Sitting all alone on a cot, her knees pulled to her chest, was Hermione Granger. When he stepped through the door her head snapped towards the door. There as a moment of silence as she examined his face.

"Harry?" she said, her voice sounded raw. He nodded and walked to her; she stood up from the cot and took a step towards him. He took in her appearance, she was wearing a pair of baggy blue pajama bottoms and a large dirty gray sweat shirt, her dark brown curls were knotted and pulled back into a messy bun and her once sparkling chocolate brown eyes were pained.

Her eyes filled with tears and a small sob escaped from her mouth, she closed the gap between them and buried her face in his chest. Without a thought he wrapped his arms around her as she sobbed into his chest, they sunk to the ground and he pulled the girl onto his lap.

"Shhh, 'Mione" he murmured into her hair "I'll take care of you". He wasn't going to tell her it would be alright, he knew it would never really be. She'd always miss them, she would always feel pain and it killed him to know that. He didn't know how long they sat like that, he just held her and let her share her pain with him. After a while her sobs faded into hiccups and she pushed herself away from him.

"I'm...I'm sorry Harry" she said wiping the tears from her eyes "I didn't mean to cry all over you like that. I got your shirt all wet!"

He gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "It doesn't matter. Are you alright?" he cringed a soon as the words left his mouth, "*Stupid question. Of course she's not all right!*" She shrugged a little and glanced out of the window.

"As good as can be expected I guess" she bit her lip and looked down at her lap, tears filling her eyes again. "It was...it was so horrible Harry!". He reached over and held on of her hands.

"What happened Hermione?" Taking a shaky breath she lifted her red-rimmed eyes to his.

"We were" he voice caught and she looked away from him. A far-away look glazing over her eyes. "We were sitting down to watch a movie when we heard screaming from outside, my Dad went to the window to see what was going on. I knew it was them Harry! I knew it as soon as I saw the look on his face. I jumped up from the table and pulled put my wand, we started to run down to the basement but then there was an explosion in the living room. They had blown our door open, we didn't even have a chance to run. They disarmed me and dragged us into the living room, they tied my parents up and then...then they cast the cruciatus on me" he flinched, utter horror and shock entering his mind.

She shuddered and continued "When they finally stopped...they..." tears began flowing down her cheeks. "They killed them. Without a thought they just killed them! They just laughed and laughed, like it was nothing! I got so mad, I don't think I've ever been that furious! The windows started shaking then they broke and...I don't know what I did but all of a sudden the Deatheaters near me flew into the air! It was like there was some sort of earthquake, the entire house was shaking. The Deatheaters all apparted away." She looked back at him, the anguished look in her eyes nearly broke his heart. "I waited. I waited and waited for the Order to come. There was supposed to be guards watching our house. No one ever came Harry, not them, not the ministry, no one! A few hours later the police showed up and brought me to the station and then here" she said gesturing to the small room she was in. She looked down at their joined hands. "I thought that sooner or later someone would come for me. I mean even if the Order didn't come I thought the Weasley's would have"

her voice was bitter “I thought at least *Ron* cared enough to come for me.”

If he was angry before he was livid now. Seeing Hermione in this state, seeing her so hurt and vulnerable, so *scared* completely broke any trust and respect he had left in Dumbledore, in the Order. He was not going to leave the protection of those he loved in the hands of that meddling old fool and his useless followers, he wasn't going to be Dumbledore's pawn anymore.

“Hermione” she kept her eyes firmly in her lap “Hermione look at me” he reach over and lifted her chin so that her eyes met his. “*I* care about you, I came for you and I *will* protect you.” He said firmly. She nodded at him and gave him a shaky smile. He released her chin and pulled her to her feet.

“Now, where are your things?” she gestured to a corner of the room where her school trunk stood.

“This is all I have, my school things and uniforms. Well and this outfit” she said looking down at herself. He nodded at her then looked behind him where Manny had been standing politely in the doorway.

“There's someone I'd like you to meet” he said beckoning the elf to him “This is my House-Elf Manny” she gave him a small smile and shook his hand the turned to Harry.

“What are you doing with a house-elf?! How can you promote the enslavement of these poor creatures! Are you paying him?” Manny looked up at the girl in shock

“Oh no, no Ms. Granger! Manny is paid!” he said “ Mistress Potter paid us very well” he said with a solemn nod.

“Oh. I guess that's alright...” she said scrutinizing the little elf. “I see you're wearing clothes, are you a free elf?” Manny adopted a horrified look.

“No! Manny not free! Mistress gave us cloth and asked we make our own clothing! DeeDi make this for me” he said tugging on his tunic. Hermione nodded at him then turned back to Harry.

"Where are we going Harry?" he smiled at her and leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"The Potter Family Cottage, Ainsley's Road, Scotland" he said then leaned back, noticing the blush that rose to her face. "Remember that". He turned back to Manny.

"Can you shrink Hermione's trunk please?" the elf nodded happily and snapped his fingers, the trunk rose into the air and then shrunk to the size of a match box. He handed it to the girl who slipped it into her pocket.

"Is that everything 'Mione?" Harry asked

"Um, yes that's it"

"Are we ready to leave Master Harry?" Manny asked

"Yes, lets get going" The elf reached out and grabbed both their hands.

"Close your eyes young miss".

He had to nearly carry Hermione up the stairs, she was barely awake. She had been absolutely amazed by the house, she loved it almost as much as he did. He had wanted to show her the Library but she was so tired he decided to just take her to her room. Keeping one arm around the near sleep girl her reached out with his other hand and turned the knob on the door next to his and stepped inside. The room was one of the many guest rooms in the cottage. The walls were white and trimmed in gold, the floors were done in light wood, the bed was in the middle of the room and a large burgundy plush rug was under it. The blankets on the bed were white and embroidered with small gold flowers, there were six large red pillows and three small gold ones, and white curtains hung around it. There was a fireplace and huge light wood bookcases lined one wall and there were two high backed plush white and gold chairs with little red pillows.

"Hermione" he whispered to her. She cracked open her eyes

“What? Harry? Is this my room?” she said her eyes widening and she took in the elegance of her new room. He smiled at her amazement.

“Yep, you like it?”

“Yes! This is too much!” she stepped away from him and ran her fingers over one of the chairs.

“Don’t be silly ‘Mione, it’s the least I could do” she turned around and smiled at him. His breath caught in his throat, the light from the candles behind her gave her glow and illuminated the subtle red highlights in her hair. *“God she’s beautiful”*

“What?” he blinked, her voice pulling him out of his thoughts. “You were staring at me” he could feel the heat rushing to his face.

“Sorry, its nothing” she gave him a disbelieving look and walked closer to him.

“What’s that on your face?! You *pierced* your eyebrow!” she exclaimed. He rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, it was a kind of spur of the moment thing”

“It fits you” Her eyes roamed over him. “Wow Harry! You look....taller” she said, blushing a bit. There was an awkward silence, each one of them trying not to make eye contact with the other.

“Err, well I guess you should get some sleep” he said walking back towards the door.

“Yeah, goodnight Harry” he repeated her sentiment and opened the door.

“Wait Harry!” he turned around with raised an eyebrow. She walked to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“Thank you” she whispered in his ear.

"You know I'd do anything for you 'Mione" he whispered back. Giving him one last squeeze she let him go, he gave her a small smile and left the room.

Harry woke to the sound of a horrific scream. He quickly grabbed his wand from under his pillow and swung out of bed, stepping out into the hall the sound got louder. It was coming from Hermione's room. He jerked the door open and sprinted into the room. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness he gazed around the room but instead of the attacker he expected to see he saw Hermione thrashing and screaming in her sleep. Promptly slipping his wand into the pocket of his pajamas he stepped to the large bed and called out to her.

"Hermione! Wake up Hermione!" he said shaking her lightly by the shoulders. She shot out of bed still screaming, her hands flew into the air and she started violently striking him.

"Hermione! Stop!" he slid onto the bed and grabbed her wrists, narrowly avoiding a blow to his stomach. She tugged restlessly, trying to brake free of his grip. Her eyes flew open and she glanced around the room in panic, her earlier screams slowly fading into sobs a whimpers. Her scared, anguished eyes flew to his face and a look of recognition entered her eyes. He let go of her wrists and she flew into his lap, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck and he legs wrapping around her waist. Loud tortured sobs wracked her small frame. All he could do was pull her closer to him and whisper comforting words in her ears, it hurt him that he couldn't get rid of her pain, her fears, that he couldn't just make it al better. As he was stroking her hair he saw DeeDi standing in the hallway peering in at them, he gave her a small nod; she nodded back at him a disappeared. Turning back to Hermione he hugged her closer to him and placed kiss on her forehead. Soon her crying faded but he continued to hold her close and she didn't pull away. She lifted her head from his chest and looked into his face, looking down at her he brush the tears from her soft face.

"Better?" he murmured to her. She gave him a jerky nod, sniffing slightly she leaned back against him.

"I keep seeing it" she said, her voice broken and small "Over and over, the curse hitting them, the life fading from their eyes and me...me just sitting there and doing nothing!" her voice was cracking and tears were once again running from her tired red rimmed eyes. "I should have protected them! Now they're gone and it's all my fault" she made to pull away from him but he once again grabbed her wrists and looked into her eyes, his own burning with intensity.

"Listen to me Hermione. It. Is. Not. Your. Fault." he said firmly "It is Voldemort's fault. It's the Death Eaters fault. *He* ordered it; *they* held their wands and cast that curse *you did not*. Don't for one second blame yourself, I know what that's like Hermione, and I know what those kind of thoughts can do to you! I won't stand by and that happen to you! You mean way too much to me for me to let you go through that." Silence filled the room as his words sunk in. He saw some of the guilt leave her eyes.

"Thank you Harry" she whispered. He just nodded at her. She detangled herself from his embrace and leaned back against her pillows. He examined her face, there were large dark circles under her eyes and her eyes were bloodshot. She was exhausted, she looked as if she would pass out from exhaustion.

"You need to get some sleep 'Mione" he said standing up from the bed. She shot up from her pillows and grabbed his arm.

"Please..." she closed her eyes briefly "Please don't leave me, I don't think I could take being alone again" she said, her eyes were pleading with him. Swallowing thickly he nodded.

"I'll stay" she sighed in relief and let go of his arm. He waited until she settled herself back into the bed before he walked to the fireplace, her eyes following his every move, and grabbed one of the chairs and pulled it back over to the bed. Sitting in the chair he watched as she slowly drifted off to sleep.

Her sleep was far from peaceful, she tossed and turned all night calling out for her parents, calling for help, calling for him. Every time she did this he would reach out and touch her hand or run his fingers through her hair, always reassuring her that he was still there for her. Watching her he knew that he could never again let anything happen

to her, she meant so much more to him than he had ever thought. She had always been there for him, always stuck by his side and this time it was his turn, he could not ever let her down again.

After a while she settled down and fell into a semi-peaceful sleep and he let himself lean forward and place his head on the mattress, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep. He felt the sun hit his face, closing his eyes tighter he put his arms over his head, a soft giggle forced him to crack his eyes open. Hermione's brown orbs met his; she was lying on her side watching him, a soft smile of her face.

"What's so funny?" he mumbled. He sat up and yawned. She giggled again

"Nothing." He shrugged and stood up, stretching his pained muscles, *"Note to self: never sleep like that again"*.

"What time is it?" he asked

"A little after 3" his eyes widened

"What?! I can't believe I slept so late!" She got out of bed and tugged self-consciously at her sweatshirt.

"Thank you for staying with me last night Harry..." her voice faded into a whisper "I don't think I can take being alone anymore." He looked down at her tiny frame, seeing her so fragile brought on a fierce rush of protectiveness. He stepped to her and held her face in his hands, lifting it so she was looking directly at him.

"Hermione, I will *a/ways* be there for you" he gazed into her eyes, hoping to show her that he really meant it.

"Promise?" her voice sounded so small. *"I hate seeing her like this"*

"I promise." He pulled her into a hug. *"I promise"*. A polite cough came from behind them, they quickly drew apart. DeeDi was standing nervously in the doorway.

"Excuse me Master, Manny says young Mistress has no clothing." She said "DeeDi comes to help." Hermione turned to the elf.

“Thank you DeeDi” she said.

“I guess I’ll leave you two alone” Harry said. Bidding farewell to them Harry left the room. Going back to his room he grabbed a button-up black shirt and some dark jeans and headed into the master bathroom. After taking a long relaxing shower, he pulled on his clothes and went downstairs to the family dining room. Walking into the room he stopped dead in his tracks. Hermione was sitting at the table eating breakfast; she was dressed in a purple sweater and a mid-thigh length black skirt, her dark brown hair was loose and fell down to her waist in curly waves. She turned her head towards him and grinned.

“You like it? DeeDi transfigured it from my pajamas” she said and ran her fingers over the soft material of the skirt. Shaking himself out of his stupor he walked the rest of the way into the room and sat across from her, a plate of food instantly appearing in front of him.

“Yeah, you look beautiful” she blushed and put her head down but her expression was quite pleased. They ate the rest of their meal in a comfortable silence. Harry put down his fork and waited for her to finish eating, as soon as she finished he stood up and held his hand out to her.

“Come on, there’s something I want to show you something” she gave him a suspicious look and took hold of his hand. He pulled her out of her chair and out of the room; he led her up the stairs and to the end of the hall. Directly in front of them stood a towering double-door. The high wooden doors were carved with the images of animals that ran and flew across the surface. Harry turned back to Hermione, taking note of her amazed face he instructed her to close her eyes, when he saw her do that he faced the door again and grabbed one of the solid gold handles and swung the doors open. He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her to the middle of the library.

“Ok, open you eyes!” She opened her eyes and gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. Even he had to admit that the library was an awe inspiring site. The ceiling was painted in amazing detail with the imagery of storybook characters, the soft blue walls contrasted beautifully with the dark woods of the floor and bookcases. The light

from the stained glass windows cast a rainbow of colors throughout the room and large enchanted paintings of landscapes hung over the huge fireplaces. Large candle lit iron chandeliers lit the room with soft light, there were beautiful marble chess sets by each of the fireplaces; huge windows were covered by heavy dark green velvet curtains, and the room was dotted with large comfortable green and blue chairs and cushions. Nearly every wall was taken up by the large bookcases and every single one of them was filled with books.

“What do you think?” he asked the shocked girl. She turned back to face him with a wild grin on her face.

“This is amazing!” she exclaimed then walked to one of the bookcases. “With half the books here I could completely rewrite my summer homework!” she ran her fingers over the spine of the books “Some are completely out of print!” she was nearly hyperventilating in her excitement.

“I figured you’d like it here” he couldn’t help but grin at the look on her face, she was like a kid in a candy store. He’d missed seeing her this happy. She was already staring to pull books off one of the shelves.

“I’ll be back in a little while ok ‘Mione?” she just grunted at him her nose already buried in a book. Shaking his head he left the room and walked back to his room. Closing the door behind him he went and sat at his desk and pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill.

Dumbledore,

Things are going to change. I can no longer sit idly by while you and your damn order run my life, while you screw me over. I can no longer trust you with the safety of my loved ones. How could you leave Hermione alone like that? You promised her family you would keep them safe and you failed them.

You have lied to me, you have deceived me, and I will not take a damn thing you say to me as truth. You are not my guardian; you have no right to dictate my life! You had no right to send me to live with the fucking Dursley’s for all those years! We will schedule a meeting, just the two of us at Grimmauld Place. You will tell me everything that you have been keeping from me all

these years, you will not give me any of that “I’ll tell you when you’re ready” or “You’ll know when you’re older” shit.

If I catch even an inkling of a lie coming out of your mouth I will disappear again. What will the wizarding world do without their hero? We both know what the prophesy says, who will fulfill it if I’m gone?

Don’t test me old man.

Remember, I am not your pawn and I am not your soldier.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

It took him nearly an hour to finish the letter. He had to keep pausing to calm himself down. He folded the parchment and slipped it into an envelope. Hedwig flew from her perch and landed next to him, sticking out her leg.

“Sorry girl, not today” he said scratching her chest.

“Manny!” there was a pop and the little old elf appeared in the room.

“Yes young master?” he said

“Sorry to bother you Manny but I was wondering if you could deliver this letter for me? I don’t want to impose on you but I can’t send Hedwig, someone could place a tracking charm on her” the elf nodded and took the letter from Harry’s hand. “Could you please take this to Albus Dumbledore?”

“Of course Master Harry”

“Can you stay for a little while in case he wants to reply?”

“Yes”

“Be careful Manny” he said. The elf nodded once again and popped away. Sighing he pulled himself out of his chair and left the room. He walked back into the library and instantly spotted Hermione. She was

curled up in one of the chairs in front of one of the fireplaces with a large transfiguration tome on her lap. He walked over and sat on the arm of the chair.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" she closed the book in her lap and looked up at him.

"I was trying to find the spell for transfiguring clothing. I can't have DeeDi doing it for me every day"

"We could go and buy you some more clothes if you'd like?" she looked away from him.

"I don't...I don't have any money" he gave her a dismissive wave.

"Then I'll buy them for you" she shook her head vigorously

"I couldn't ask you to do that! You've already done so much for me!"

"Nonsense! I'm your friend, I *want* to help you out."

"No Harry." She gave him a look. He knew that look, "*End of discussion*". Sighing he changed the subject.

"So, what do you want to do?" she jumped out of the chair, nearly causing him to fall off.

"I want to go outside!" he looked out of one of the windows and gave her an incredulous look.

"Its raining!" she rolled her eyes and grabbed hold of his hand, pulling him into a standing position. She pulled him out of the room.

"It's only a drizzle"

"Shouldn't we at least put our shoes on?!" she stopped walking and turned to him, giving him an exasperated look.

"Of course not! Have you never played in the rain before?!"

"No" he said "Well when I was six Uncle Vernon locked me outside in the rain when I tracked mud into the kitchen. That wasn't too much fun" he chuckled. Hermione was staring at him in shock.

"What?" he asked. Her bottom lip trembled slightly and she threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh Harry! I'm so sorry!" he looked down at her in alarm

"What?! What's wrong?" she pulled away from him grabbed his hands.

"No one should have to live like that! I don't know how you lived with them so long and still grew up to be such a sweet person" he blushed and shrugged slightly.

"It's not that big of a deal 'Mione"

"Yes it is Harry! No one should be treated like that, especially not a child! I don't understand why you had to live with them." He snorted

"Ask Dumbledore." Her expression changed, her eyes narrowing and her lips pressing together.

"There's one more thing to add to the list of mistakes that man has made." She said heatedly. Twining her fingers through his she started back down the stairs.

"Enough of this talk. Let's go have some fun!" Hitting the landing they headed to the formal dining room where the back door was. As soon as she opened the door she let go of his hand and ran out, he stood on the deck watching her. She lifted her head and closed her eyes, letting the light rain wash over her face. A blissful smile crept onto her face and she began to twirl, her arms were spread out wide as she danced across the lush green grass. His breath caught in his throat as he watched her, her hair fanned around her and a completely content expression decorated her face. She stopped her wild dance and looked back at him, seeing him still standing on the deck she reached out to him.

"Come on Harry!" she shouted.

“I’m coming!” He stepped out into the downpour and walked towards her, his bare feet sinking into the soft grass. As soon as he was in front of her she gave him a grin and dashed away.

“Catch me!” she shouted over her shoulder. He grinned and sprinted after her. They spent the next hour chasing each other through the rain which continued to come down harder and harder. It was starting to get dark when he finally caught her under one of the fruit trees; he grabbed her around the waist and threw her over his shoulder. She dissolved into shrieks and giggles and she pounded on his back.

“Harry James Potter!” she shouted between giggles “Put me down this instant!”

“What’s the magic word?” he teased tickling her sides.

“Now!” she shrieked

“Nope! I don’t think that’s it”

“Okay!” she giggled “Please!”

“There it is!” he placed her gently back on the ground. Her face was flushed and she had a delighted expression. There was a flash of lightening and Hermione jumped a foot in the air. He reached over and placed a hand on the small of her back.

“It’s getting late, we should go inside” he said

“Yeah, I’m soaked to the bone!” laughing they darted from under the tree and to the back door. Stepping through the door they came face to face (well more face to knee) with DeeDi.

“Look at the two of you!” she shrieked conjuring to big fluffy white towel and handing them to the soaking teenagers. “Running out in the rain like that! Yous gonna catch your death doing that!” they exchanged amused glances. She sat them down at the huge table and with a snap of her fingers lit the fireplace and conjured them steaming cups of tea and big bowls of hot soup. “Now you eat it all up and go straight to bed!”

“But-” Harry started.

“No buts young Master! Yous and Mistress Hermione must get your rest! I can’t let you two fall ill.” They finished their meal in silence as DeeDi watched them. When they finished their food she bustled them to their rooms, Harry barely had time to tell Hermione goodnight before she pushed him into his room. Bidding the elf goodnight he closed the door behind him, he had begun to pull of his sodden shirt when he heard someone clear their throat. He quickly drew his wand and pointed at the source of the voice, standing by his fireplace was Manny. Lowering his wand he placed a hand on his chest, over his racing heart.

“Manny! You scared me!” the little elf gave him a sheepish smile.

“Manny apologizes young Master” he said. Harry gave him a small smile

“It’s alright. Did Dumbledore reply?” the elf nodded and pulled a piece of parchment out of his tunic and handed it to Harry.

“He seemed quite displeased with your message Master Harry” said Manny. A smirk emerged on Harry’s face.

“I should think he would have been” The old elf rubbed his neck and closed his eyes briefly.

“Oh! I’m sorry Manny!” said Harry “Thank you for doing this for me, you can take a rest now” Manny gave a short bow then popped out of the room. As soon as he was gone Harry opened the letter.

Mr. Potter.

It greatly saddens me to know that you have lost so much trust in me. The death of Ms. Granger’s parents is quite a tragedy but how was I to keep watch over them when I had to send guards to keep track of you? I had hoped that you would come to understand that the things that I have done have been to protect you not to “Screw you over” and “Run your life” as you put it. I had hoped that after the death of your godfather you would understand the importance of the things I tell you or ask you to

do. You say that I have deceived you but that is far from the truth, the things that I have kept from you were for your own safety.

No I am not your guardian Harry but I have guarded you. I placed you with your relatives because I knew that that was the safest place for you. It was the one place I knew that Voldermort could not touch you. With your family. If it means that much to you Harry I apologize, I apologize for keeping your best interests at heart. You can meet me in exactly three weeks at Grimmauld Place at 3pm. I will tell you everything Harry but I will not be responsible for what dangers may come to you by knowing this information. I can say Harry that I am quite appalled that you would threaten to leave the wizarding world and leave your friends at the mercy of Voldermort.

I have never treated you as a pawn Harry and you know this.

-Albus Dumbledore

"That manipulation old jackass! How the hell can he try to guilt me like that?!" He threw the letter into his fireplace and began to pull off his damp clothing. *"Best interests at heart my ass! The only interests he's looking out for is his own."* He walked to his wardrobe and grabbed some pajama bottoms and a t-shirt and pulled them on.

"Nox" he said and all the lights were extinguished from the room. Laying in his bed he forced himself to calm down, to lock his anger away. He took several calming breaths and tried to clear his mind. Soon the sound of the soft rain outside lulled him to sleep.

Someone was shaking him, whispering his name. He cracked his eyes open slightly and stared at the fuzzy shape that was standing next to his bed. He reached over and grabbed his glasses off his bedside table, slipping them on his face he looked at the figure again and realized who it was. Hermione was standing there in her dark blue pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt. He sat up quickly and looked into her face, noticing the tear tracks on her cheeks.

“Mione? What’s wrong?” he asked groggily. She had one of her arms wrapped tightly around her middle and the other was twisting the end of her thick braid.

“I...” she started and looked down at her feet “I had another dream” seeing her slightly ashamed expression he wordlessly lifted up an edge of his blanket and slid over, inviting her in. Without hesitation she slid into the bed and buried her face in the nape of his neck, he wrapped his arms around her, her entire body was shaking. He didn’t say anything, he knew there was nothing he could say that would make her feel better, and he just held her close to him and stroked her hair, projecting comfort and support to her. After a couple of minutes she finally stopped shaking and laid her head down on the pillow next to his, her eyes closed. He at first thought she was sleeping until she spoke.

“I hate this” she whispered

“What?”

“I hate being this...weak, this helpless.” She opened her pained brown eyes and peered into his. “Every time I’m alone, every time you aren’t there I get so *scared!* It’s like I’m a little kid again, running to my parents at night because I’m afraid of the dark.” Tears were beginning to run down her face. “When I was in that home I would stay up all night waiting for someone to come and rescue me. I guess a part of me knew they wouldn’t come but I couldn’t think it, I couldn’t let myself think that the only people I trusted had abandoned me! I kept praying that it was all a dream, that I would wake up in my room and go down the hallway and my parents would be there. I was just about to give up Harry, I was ready to just curl up in that room and let myself waste away.” He closed his eyes briefly then grabbed her hands in his “If you hadn’t come when you did...” she didn’t finish her sentence she just closed her eyes again, letting the tears fall down her face. Harry reached over and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“I wish I could take it all away Hermione.” He whispered. She opened her eyes and looked back at him. “I wish I could just make all the pain you feel go away. I’d like to say I understand but I don’t, my parents died when I was just a baby but you *knew* your parents.” He pressed

his forehead to hers "You are my *best friend*. You have stood by me through everything, you have given me your love, your support, and your friendship! can tell you right now you mean more to me than anyone else in the world.

When *you* hurt / hurt. I promised you that I would never leave you Hermione and I meant it. I will do everything in my power to help you." She was sobbing now. He gathered her in his arms, placing his chin on her head and let her cry on his shoulder. "*I will never let you down again Hermione*". He held her like that, whispering comforting words into her ear until they fell asleep in each other's arms.

A/N: My longest chapter yet! As y'all probably can tell I'm not that good with heartfelt moments. Thank you to all those who have reviewed! I appreciate it so much!

Chapter 9

He was warm and there was a weight on his chest but he was comfortable. He cracked his eyes open and his vision was obscured by some sort of brown mass. Opening his eyes wider he looked down, Hermione was curled up next to him, her head on his chest and her lips were slightly parted. He smiled down at her, for the first time she actually looked peaceful.

He lifted his arm from around her waist and checked the watch on his wrist, he was already 9 in the morning and he had to go to the bathroom. Shifting his weight he tried to slide from underneath her but her legs were firmly wrapped around his and nearly her entire body was flush against his. Once he realized he wouldn't be able to get out of bed without waking her he gently shook her shoulders.

"Go 'way" she mumbled and nuzzled closer to him. Snickering he shook her again.

"Wake up 'Mione" She lifted her head from his chest and blinked owlishly at him.

"Harry?" she said groggily "Why are you in my bed?"

"Actually this is *my* bed" he said smirking at her. She turned her head and looked around the room and then back at him and the position they were in. Her eyes widened and she jumped off of him and off the edge of the bed. He burst into laughter.

"It's not funny Harry!" she grumbled and stood up from the floor. "I was wondering why my pillow was so warm". Still laughing at her he got out of bed and stretched, Hermione's eyes following his movement.

"So what do you want to do today?" he asked. "Hermione?" she snapped her eyes from his chest and to his face.

"Huh?" he raised an eyebrow.

"I said. What do you want to do today?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd like to look around the house a bit, if that's ok?" he shrugged.

"Sure, I haven't had a chance to really look around." He turned, grabbed some jeans and a black, white, and blue sweater out of his wardrobe and walked to the door of his private bathroom. "Now if you'll excuse me I have some business to attend to". After his shower he went back to his room. Hermione was still there though she must have left because she was dressed in a blue sweater and khaki pants and her hair was in a high ponytail. She was standing by one of his bookshelves.

"DeeDi transfigured that for you?" he asked. She looked over her shoulder at him and grinned.

"Nope! I did it myself" she looked back at his bookshelf and pulled two books out.

"What are you doing with these books Harry?" she asked, a small frown appearing on her face. He walked over to stand next to her and took the books from her hands. **"Advanced Defense Magic"** and **"The Dark Arts: The Truth behind the Magic"**. He shrugged and put them back on the shelf.

"Its stuff I need to know." She turned and looked him in the face.

"The dark arts Harry? That "stuff" is not only dangerous it's illegal! Why would you need to know anything about that?" he looked into her eyes and sighed, *"She needs to know"*. He took her hand and sat her on one of the chairs by his fireplace.

"Look Hermione. There is something I need to tell you and I need you to know that what I have to say could put you in a lot of danger." He said firmly. She looked solemnly into his eyes.

"I don't care. I'm there for you." He looked down into her trusting face. He knew he could trust her and he knew that she had to know the truth but was it really worth it? Was it really worth it to put her in even more danger than she already is by him just being her friend? Sighing again he began to pace.

“Ok, do you remember the prophecy at the department of mysteries?” furrowing her brows she nodded. “Well I was able to hear the entirety of it.”

“But I thought it was destroyed?”

“It was but that wasn’t the only recording of it. Before my parents died a seer came to Dumbledore and told him the prophecy. Dumbledore was the one to first hear it and he was able to save it in a pensive. He told me what it said.” He stopped his pacing and stood in front of her.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...” All was silent as Hermione worked through the words, all of a sudden her hands flew to her mouth and she stared at him in horror.

“No...” she whispered “I mean...how you can...why didn’t?” She blinked back her tears, she couldn’t cry anymore. She stood from the chair and slipped her hands through his.

“Ok.” She took a deep breath “I’m guessing that it’s saying that...you are the one that will have to defeat Voldermort.”

“Yeah, that’s about right.” He said

“And this *“power the dark lord knows not”*? Do you have any idea what it is?” Harry shook his head.

“No. I’ve been trying to think of something but...” he shrugged.

“So you say Dumbledore was the one to first hear it? He knew about it all along?”

“Yes.”

“Did he tell you his plan? I mean he can’t really expect you to be able to just go and kill one of the most powerful wizards in the world?! Why hasn’t he been training you from the start?” Wrenching his hands from hers he again began to pace.

“Don’t you see Hermione? He *has* been training me.” A confused expression crossed her face. “The Sorcerer’s Stone, The Chamber of Secrets, and the Tri-Wizard! Do you really believe that all that stuff happened in Hogwarts and he knew nothing about it? That he didn’t know about Quirrell? Or us and the polyjuice potion or the diary and the bloody basilisk?! That he knew nothing of my name being in the cup or Barty Crouch Jr.?! Or the DA?” he stopped and stood directly in front of her. The lights began to flicker and one of his windows began to crack.

“Don’t you see? He put me through all that shit so he could mold me into the perfect little soldier!” he spat out the words, his voice angry and bitter. “He sat there while I was almost fucking killed! He sat there and did *nothing* while we ran off to the department of mysteries and faced fucking deatheaters!” He had never felt so furious in his life, just thinking back on his life! The things he had to see! The people who had to *die*, because of some old man’s agendas? The glass from the chandelier hanging in the middle of his room was breaking and showering the room with glass. Hermione looked around and once she realized what was going on she hurriedly grabbed Harry’s shoulders and stopped his pacing.

“Harry! Look at me Harry!” he turned his troubled eyes down to hers. She spoke calmly.

“I know that you’re angry Harry, you have every right to be but you need to calm down” his eyes darted around the room taking in the destruction he was causing. He shut his eyes and took several shaky breaths trying to calm himself down; he could feel Hermione rubbing his arms. Finally he opened his eyes and looked at her, giving her an unsteady smile.

“Thanks...”

“Do you feel better Harry?”

“Yeah...I’m sorry about...losing my cool like that.” She shrugged and removed her hands from his arms; he felt a twinge of disappointment at the lack of contact.

“It’s alright. Now lets sit down and talk about this.” They sat back in his chairs.

“Alright, I can see what you’re saying about Dumbledore using those incidents as kind of tests but even then...you *still* won’t be able to kill Voldermort!” she gave him a dismayed look “I can’t believe he hasn’t even been *trying* to train you! To teach you some real magic!”

“I know that’s why I have those books. I have to know what I’m up against, I have to know how to *fight* and Dumbledore sure as hell isn’t trying to teach me.” She looked at him; a determined look came over her face.

“I’ll help. I will look through every book in that library and I *will* find a way to help you.” He sighed.

“Hermione, I can’t ask yo-”

“Shut up Harry.” she interrupted “Do you think that I’ll just stand by and let you go through this alone? I’m not just some damsel in distress! I am your *best friend*, I told you I’ll stick by you no matter what.” They sat in silence for a few minutes. Harry turned and looked into Hermione’s eyes.

“Thank you Hermione” he said. She leaned over and wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear.

“That’s what friends are for.” Pulling away from him she grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the chair.

“Now, I thought we were going on a tour?” he grinned and looped his arm through hers.

“You’re right, let’s go.” They decided to start on the second floor since they had seen everything on the first. The second floor was mostly filled with bedrooms. There were six guest rooms all done in the same colors as Hermione’s and Harry’s room was also on this floor.

There was another door he hadn't really paid much attention to. It had a large ornate double door and was done in light wood.

"What room is this?" Hermione asked him. He stood in front of it and turned the handle.

"Only one way to find out." He pushed the surprisingly light door open and stepped inside, Hermione coming to stand beside him. He let out a sharp intake of breath. Through the dim light he could see a large tan and green four poster bed, two chandeliers hung dark from the ceiling and there were at least five picture windows with the tan velvet curtains closed tightly around them and small white wall lamps were spread around the room. Unlike the rest of the bedrooms in the house the fireplace was dark and dust lingered in the air and on the furniture. They stepped into the room and onto the plush white carpet, being in the room provoked a silence, the entire room seemed frozen. Harry walked over to stand by the bed and picked up a silver framed picture of the bedside table.

It was a picture of an older couple and a younger one, the younger couple was obviously his parents and as for the older couple, he could only guess they were his grandparents. The woman was stunning with long curly white blonde hair and soft hazel eyes and she had a soft smile, the man had the signature messy black potter hair and bright sky blue eyes and he had a wide lopsided grin of his handsome face. They were all sitting on a large white wicker swing hanging from a large leafy tree smiling and waving to the camera, his father making bunny ears behind his mother's back and she had one hand on her pregnant belly. He could see a braided gold necklace with a heart shaped emerald stone flashing from her neck. Inscribed at the bottom of the frame were the words ***"The Potter Family. Harold, Babette, James, Lily, and the newest Potter."*** He ran his fingers over the etching in reverence. It was the first time he had ever seen a picture of his grandparents, the first time he had ever seen a picture of his mother pregnant. It was amazing, *this was his family!* He could see his knobby knees and strong jaw in his grandfather's face, the arch of his brow and his long fingers in his grandmother.

He felt Hermione slip her hand through his and she leaned over to look at the photograph.

"They look happy." She whispered. He hurriedly blinked back his tears, carefully avoiding her eyes. He replaced the picture and Hermione released his hand.

"Yeah." He winced at the crack in his voice. Clearing his throat he turned from the bed and walked over to the fireplace which held more framed pictures and a collection of other nick-knacks on the mantel.

The first thing he picked up was another photo; this one was of his Grandparents though they looked much younger. It was obviously their wedding. His grandmother and grandfather were standing side by side in a garden, his grandfather in a perfectly tailored black suit with black and gold trimmed dress robes over it and his grandmother was wearing a long strapless white dress, her hair up in a bun and decorated with small red flowers. She was also wearing a diamond necklace. The necklace had a thin gold braided chain with a small heart shaped ruby. It was almost the exact same necklace his mother was wearing in the other picture.

"Wow, your grandmother was beautiful!" Hermione said from beside him. She was right; she could easily give Fleur a run for her money.

"Yeah, she was." He proceeded to go through the things on the mantel. There was a small statue of a lion the roared when you touched it, a pair of tiny silver shoes with the words "**James Harold Potter. July, 10th, 1968**", and a pair of dusty black framed glasses. His grandfather's glasses. There were more pictures, his father when he was young, his parent's wedding, his grandparent's dancing in the backyard. They were all so happy, so carefree. It wasn't fair! They shouldn't have had to die! They should still be here; they should still be with him! He turned from the keepsakes and headed for the door.

"I think we should leave." He said brokenly. Hermione opened her mouth as if she was going to say something but quickly closed it when she saw the expression on his face. Nodding at him she made to follow behind him. He didn't notice her slip something into her back pocket.

After leaving the room they headed up the spiraling staircase and to the third floor in silence. This floor had a completely different design than the ones below it. Instead of the red and gold of the others the

walls were done in dark wood paneling and the floor was done in smooth cool stone. There were both torches and portraits lining the walls.

“Well ‘Ello there!” a man dressed fully in shining armor with the Potter crest on his chest said from a large portrait. He was standing in what seemed to be an empty field surrounded by trees next to a large white stallion. He had a black braid that flowed down his back and wild black bangs fell in his dark blue eyes. They walked to stand in front of the portrait.

“Err...hi?” said Harry.

“Why look at him Caterina! He looks just like me!” the man shouted to a portrait across from him. This one was of a beautiful dark skinned woman sitting on a black chaise lounge, a huge gray cat at her feet. She was dressed in a deep purple floor length gown. She had knee length wavy black hair and lavender colored eyes sat in her heart shaped face, and a silver diamond tiara was perched on her head. She was also wearing the necklace but it was a silver braided chain and the stone was an Amethyst.

“Of course he does.” She said in a musical heavily Italian accented voice. “He’s your great, great, great, great, *great*, grandson.”

“I *know* that but look at him! Isn’t he a handsome fellow!”

“Of course, he’s descended from me” She smirked in their direction. “Now what brings the two of you to our domain?” she asked.

“We were just looking around the cottage.” Hermione said. The man in the portrait leaned against his horse and gave a lopsided smile.

“Why hello there fair lady!” Hermione blushed slightly. Caterina rolled her eyes and cleared her throat drawing their attention back to her.

“Leave the girl alone Bronson, she’s a bit too young for you.” He pouted and walked out of his portrait and appeared next to Caterina who looked at him rather disdainfully. He grinned at her.

"You always ruin my fun." She waved a delicate hand at him and turned back to the teens.

"It has been many years since we've seen anyone here." She said.

"What's up here?" Harry asked

"Well there are a few lounges, a dueling room, a conservatory, a potions lab, and a panic room." Caterina said. Harry couldn't help but grin.

"A dueling room?" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Indeed mate!" Bronson said enthusiastically and gestured to a dark stone door. "I built it myself". They spent a few more minute conversing with Bronson and Caterina before Harry pulled Hermione to the dueling room. Bronson was right, it was an amazing room. The floor was done in dark wood and the walls were cool stone. There was a dueling platform against one wall and four blue mats in front of it. One wall was lined with weapons. Swords, Daggers, Axes, and Crossbows. Hermione walked to another wall which held an empty portrait with a shelf under it, she walked to the shelf and picked up a small white marble statue. The low shelf was filled with small statues of men. Each man held a different weapon to match the ones on the other wall.

"These are amazingly detailed" Hermione said turning the little man over in her hand. Harry came to stand next to her and picked up a statue of a man with a crossbow.

"I wonder what they're for?" he said.

"Simple!" their heads snapped up to the portrait above them. Bronson stood there with a huge grin on his face. "They're training statues." Hermione slapped herself on the forehead.

"Oh! I should have guessed." She exclaimed. She turned to Harry with an excited look on her face.

"Training statues Harry!" he gave her a blank look. "In the 1800's wizarding armies used to enchant statues to train their troops with

weapons! When you tap them with your wand they become animated, they are like personal trainers you can put in your pocket.” Harry grinned at the little man in his hand.

“Wicked” he said “I might just have to try those out.” Hermione yanked the statue out of his hand and put them both back on the shelf.

“Are you mad?! Those weapons are dangerous!” He rolled his eyes at her.

“Come on ‘Mi! That’s all the more reason for me to learn.” She was smiling up at him.

“What?”

“Mi? Where did that come from?” he blushed slightly and scratched the back of his head.

“I don’t know...It kinda just slipped out.”

“No! I like it.” They smiled at each other.

“Ahum.” They tore their eyes away from each other and back to the portrait where Bronson was grinning down at them.

“Your lady is right young Harry.” He seemed to be taking great joy in their embarrassment. “ It is a dangerous practice *but* the statues can’t seriously harm you, they are charmed against that.”

“See, no harm in learning.” Said Harry. She crossed her arms and gave him a stern look.

“Don’t come crying to me when you accidentally cut off your arm.” After Hermione dragged him out of the dueling room then went to the conservatory.

They knew which room it was instantly because of the *huge* glass door. Harry turned the knob and it opened with a slight hiss.

“Wow” Hermione breathed. “*Wow is right*” they were standing on a balcony at the very top of the conservatory and a spiraling glass staircase was beneath them. The entire room spanned all three floors and was completely made of glass. They walked down the stairs and Harry had to catch his breath at the sight before him. You could see the entire back yard and an indoor waterfall flowed from one wall and into a large swimming pool. Next to the pool was an outdoor living room set, there was a large curved wicker and white cushion seating unit and two large armchairs and a fire pit sat in the middle. There was a white wood bar by the far wall and white roses climbed the railings and fixtures around the room. There was a showering area and there were also wicker lounge chairs stationed around the pool.

“I love this house” Hermione said from beside him. He grinned and laid down on one of the loungers.

“Me too. It feels good to have my own home.”

“I can’t wait to go swimming!” she squealed. He turned his head and grinned at her.

“Well I don’t know *how* you’re going to swim without a bathing suit but I would love to see you try.” She blushed and punched him in the arm. He gave her a mock wounded look.

“Ow Hermione! You could *bruise* me!”

“Shut up.” She sat in one of the armchairs, her face becoming serious.

“We need to talk about the prophecy, Harry.” He closed his eyes and stared up at the ceiling.

“What about it?” she sighed.

“You know just as well as I that without the proper training you have little to no chance of surviving another encounter with Voldermort.”

“I know!”

“Well then you *have* to start now.” He sat up in the chair and turned to her.

"I know, that's why I bought the books." She stood up from her seat.

"Well then let's go! We need to outline a training regiment." She started up the stairs, Harry following behind her.

"We need to find every curse, charm, and potion that can help. Do you still have that homework planner I gave you?"

"Yeah."

"Ok, we can use it plan out your training and such." When they got back to the third floor they split up, Harry going to his room to retrieve the planner and his books while Hermione headed to the library to find the books they'd need. After getting his things he went to the library and laid it all on a table where Hermione had placed rolls of parchment and quills, he then went in search for Hermione. He found her on the second floor trying to carry a huge pile of books down the stairs.

"Damn 'Mi, I leave you alone for two seconds and you try to clean out the entire library!." He grabbed half the books from her and went back down the stairs.

"Hush Harry, I picked up every book I thought could possibly help." She readjusted the tomes in her arms and grinned at him "Charms, Transfiguration, DADA, Potions, everything!"

They spent hours going over the books, writing down everything they thought could even be slightly useful. DeeDi popped in frequently to bring them food or try to convince them to rest. It was dark out when they finally decided to get some sleep.

"Ok, we'll start with shield and protection charms. We can start tomorrow morning." Harry said, fighting back a yawn. Hermione stood up and stretched, picking up the stacks of books.

"Yeah, I'm bushed! I'll take these to my room." He helped her carry the books to her room and gave her a hug goodnight.

"Goodnight, 'Mi" he turned and went to head back down the hall to his room.

“Wait Harry!” Hermione said from behind him. He turned back around and walked back to her. She reached behind her and pulled something out of her pocket.

“I thought you should keep this.” She handed a picture to him. It was the picture of his family from his grandparent’s room. “You need something to remind you that they loved you, Harry.” She stood on her toes and placed a kiss on his cheek then closed the door to her room. He stood there for a couple of minutes, staring at the photo in his hand. Cradling it to his chest he whispered to the closed door.

“Thank you.”

It was a joy to finally sink into his bed, to get to sleep. He was almost asleep when he heard a soft knock on his door. Groaning he slid out of bed and padded across the room and to the door and swung it open.

“Hermione?” she stepped into the room.

“I can’t sleep.” She whispered.

He nodded and closed the door behind her. He walked back to his bed and got back under the covers, gesturing for Hermione to follow him. Once she had snuggled under the blankets with him they went to sleep.

They spent the next two weeks like this, waking up early in the morning and going to the dueling room, working on curses and charms for hours on end, they had even found spell to take the tracking charms off their wands. Harry was even learning the basics of sword fighting from one of the statues though Hermione disapproved of it; she made sure he knew this every time she had to rub salve on his newest bruises. At night Hermione would sleep in Harry’s room. On those nights they would sometimes stay up for hours talking, sometimes about nothing and other times about everything. He found himself telling her things he had never told anyone before, about what it was really like living with the Dursley’s, the things they used to do to him. He told her how he felt when they treated him the way they did, he told her what he was feeling during all those battles with Voldemort. He even told her about Sirius. That

was the hardest thing for him, laying there and talking about it made him realize that he had been trying to forget him, trying to push him from his mind so he didn't have to feel the pain of his loss. He remembered what she had said to him.

*"Harry, you can't forget him." She had whispered. "Pushing him out of your mind won't make the pain of his loss go away. Sirius loved you, he died **for** you not **because** of you."*

She had also told him of her life, what it was like for her growing up, how the kids at school used to tease her because of her smarts and her slightly large front teeth. She talked about the guilt she felt because of her parent's death and the loss of Crookshanks who had also been killed in the attack. She spoke of the pain of the betrayal of the people she had known and trusted. They even talked about Ron which had been especially hard for the both of them. He had never felt so close to anyone. He trusted her more than anyone else in the world, he felt he could tell her anything and everything and she would never judge him.

When Harry woke early up that Saturday morning he carefully detangled himself from Hermione's arms. He checked his watch, it was 6am but he had a long ride in front of him so he had to be leaving soon. He went to his wardrobe and pulled out a pair of dark jeans, a short sleeved black tee with the logo **A/X** with wings on the shoulder, and his leather jacket. After taking a shower and getting dressed he went back to his room and gently shook Hermione awake. Sitting up in the large bed she glared at him.

"Why are you waking me up so early?" she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "And why are you all dressed?" he simply grinned at her.

"Want to go on a trip?" An hour later Harry was leaning against the wall in the entrance hall going through his messenger bag, making sure he had his bike. He was also waiting for Hermione to come downstairs. Glancing at the watch on his arm he let out a sigh, he reached back into his back and pulled out his wallet and chain keeper and hooked them to his pants. When she finally came down she was wearing her khaki pants though her sweater was light green. Her hair was loose and flowing down her back and a thick pale green

headband held her bangs from her face. She came to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips. He tried not to let his eyes travel down the curves of her body.

“Now will you tell me where we’re going?” he gave her his lopsided grin and opened the front door.

“London.” He walked outside and into the sun, Hermione pausing on the front steps.

“London?! We’re in Edinburgh!” she stared at him in disbelief. “We’re 332 miles from there! It would take us” she paused briefly “at least six hours!”

“Maybe on a train but” he opened his bag and pulled out what appeared to be a toy motorbike and put it on the walkway, reaching into his back pocket he pulled out his wand and tapped the bike causing it to return to it’s original size. “on this we’d get there in half the time.” She took one look at the bike and turned around, heading back into the house.

“No way!” she said “I am *not* getting on that, that thing!” he raced after her and grabbed her hand, dragging her back down the steps.

“Come on Hermione! It’s completely safe. There are so many anti-crash charms on here I could drive it off the side of a cliff and be perfectly fine!”

“Well you go on ahead and do that, I’ll stay here.” She made to go back into the house but he wrapped his arms around her waist and pouted at her.

“Please ‘Mi? you know I would never let you get on it if it was even slightly dangerous.” She stared up into his eyes; he could see her breaking down. She sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Oh Fine!” she relented. He grinned at her and placed a kiss on her forehead. After releasing her he popped open the seat on his bike and pulled out the two helmets and handed one to Hermione. She looked down at it a grimaced slightly.

“Where did you get this from Harry?” with a small smile he ran his fingers over the bike.

“Sirius.”

“Oh”

He put the helmet on and swung onto the bike. Hesitantly Hermione slipped hers on and swung on behind him.

“Hold on tight ‘Mi” he said. She jumped slightly, through the helmet it sounded as if he was speaking directly into her ears. The engine roared to life and Hermione quickly twined her arms around his waist, two seconds later they were flying down the path and through the gates which opened as soon as they were near. As they roared down the tree lined road Hermione was squeezing his waist tightly and her eyes were shut tightly, she was trying desperately to keep herself from screaming, she had never rode on anything that fast before.

“This is great ‘eh ‘Mi?!” Harry said. She could hear the sheer joy in his voice.

“Great isn’t quite the word I was looking for!” he laughed. They had by now reached the expanse of empty road.

“Okay, now we can really start going!” all of a sudden the bike went three times as fast and this time Hermione failed to keep herself from screaming. She could hear Harry laughing in her ears.

“Not funny! Not funny at all!” they rode at that speed for what seemed like hours but was really only a few minutes. After a while Hermione let herself open her eyes. The world zipped around her in a blur of color, she felt a rush of adrenaline flow through her veins and an untamed joy filled her chest. Soon a wild grin crossed her face. She let out a shriek of joy.

“Enjoying yourself?” Harry asked, you could practically hear the grin in his voice. She giggled and loosened her hold slightly on his waist.

"I think I am." They were making it into the village so they had to unfortunately slow down. Harry spotted a café and was reminded that they had missed breakfast.

"Are you hungry, 'Mi?" he asked.

"Yes, a bit." He slowed the bike down more and pulled in front of the café. Cutting the engine he took off his helmet and swung off, Hermione following his action. After putting the helmets away they walked arm in arm into the cozy building. They found a table next to the window and sat down.

A young woman with light brown hair pulled into a low ponytail walked over to them.

"Hi! I'm Elizabeth and I'll be your waitress today." She said. She handed them both menus.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"Yes, I'd like a glass of orange juice please" Hermione said. Elizabeth nodded and wrote it down then turned to Harry, brushing a strand of hair out of her face. He looked up from his menu and smiled at her.

"Just a cup of tea please." Blushing she wrote it down also and stumbling slightly walked to the counter. Hermione looked at Harry and frowned.

"You shouldn't do that you know." He gave her a confused look.

"What?"

"Dazzle people like that!" if anything he was even more confused.

"Dazzle? What do you mean?" she gave a long suffering sigh and put her menu down, folding her arms over it.

"Look what you did to the poor girl! One smile and she could barely walk." He blushed and scratched the back of his head.

"I dazzle people?"

"Girls mostly" she mumbled and picked her menu back up. A grin slowly filled his face, he leaned forward on one elbow.

"Do I dazzle you?" she looked from behind the menu, heat filling her face. She was saved from having to answer when Elizabeth returned. From behind her you could see two more waitresses leaning from behind the counter looking in their direction.

"Are you ready to order." She was looking only at Harry. Hermione raised an eyebrow at him and jerked her head in the direction of the other girls. Choosing to ignore her Harry turned to Elizabeth.

"Yes, I'd like some French toast, please." He said handing her his menu. Hermione put her menu down.

"And I'd like a cinnamon roll." The girl glanced in her direction and picked up her menu off the table.

"Alright, I'll be right back with your order." Giving Harry another smile she once again stumbled away. Hermione gave him a triumphant look.

"See?" he waved his hand dismissively and smirked at her.

"You never answered my question." She tried to look nonchalant.

"What question?"

"Do I dazzle you?" she colored slightly and looked away, sipping her juice.

"Frequently." He grinned at her flushed face. She turned and looked back at him, his eyes instantly drawing her gaze. They sat like that for a while, in comfortable silence, just looking into each others eyes. They were torn out of their staring contest when Elizabeth returned with their food.

"Thank you." Harry said to her. She nodded at them then left them to their meal.

"I don't think I'll be able to eat all this!" Hermione said looking at the huge gooey roll on her plate.

"You're right" Harry leaned over and swept his finger through the warm frosting and ate it. His eyes twinkling mischievously. She looked at him in mock fury and grabbed her fork, leaning over the table and taking a huge chunk out of his French toast and stuffed it in her mouth. He couldn't help but laugh at the expression on her face.

"Now" she licked the syrup from her lip. "Where exactly is it that we are going?"

Taking a sip from his tea he leaned back in his chair.

"Shopping." She gave him a blank stare.

"Shopping?"

"Yeah, a couple of weeks ago when I bought all my new clothing I had a few suits made for me and I need to pick them up. Maybe we could even pick up a few things for you." She set down her fork and folded her arms.

"We've already had this conversation Harry. You will *not* be buying me any clothes!"

"Come on 'Mi! I know you're tired of always having to transfigure things for yourself. Why can't you just let me help you?"

"I'd feel bad letting you spend money on me when I know I can't pay you back!" They were silent for a little while then Harry grinned and leaned forward.

"I know a way to remedy that!" she raised an eyebrow at him. "Your birthday is coming up in September right? You can let me buy you a couple of outfits and we'll just consider them early birthday gifts!" she gave him a dubious look.

"Maybe." He rolled his eyes at her. They continued the rest of their meal talking about old times. When they were done they went to the counter for Harry to pay. Another young woman was standing there,

she had strawberry blonde hair and brown eyes. She gave Harry a flirty smile and twisted a lock of her hair around her finger.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" she asked as he handed her his card, making sure to leave a tip for Elizabeth.

"Yes, we did." He answered. She glanced behind him and gave Hermione a rather contemptuous look. She handed Harry his card, casually slipping a slip of paper into his hand. He looked at it, scrawled on it was a phone number with the name Misty above it.

"Have a nice day." She said, giving him a wink. Seeing the number in his hand Hermione took it and threw it into the bin next to the counter, she then reached over and twined her fingers through Harry's.

"You too." She said and tugged him out of the café. He pulled their helmets out of the compartment and handed hers to her.

"What was that about?"

"What?" she asked, a smirk on her pretty face.

"That little show in the café!"

"Oh that? She was all wrong for you." She put the helmet on and swung onto the bike. Shaking his head he put his on and got on in front of her.

Three and a half hours later they were parking in front of the shopping center in London. When they had gotten off the bike and Harry stowed their gear he reached over to where the gas tank was and pushed a small blue button. The entire bike shuddered slightly and flashed blue.

"What was that?" Hermione asked.

"Anti-Theft charm. If anyone has the urge to steal it their thoughts will be automatically diverted." They proceeded down the crowded walkway and into the large building, they were instantly plunged into the milling crowd. Harry reached over and took Hermione's hand.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"This way." They forced their way through the crowd and to the store in the distance. Stepping out of the crowd and into the store they couldn't help but let out sighs of relief. As soon as they were inside Brita came from behind the counter.

"Harry! I knew I'd see you today!" She had a huge grin on her face. "Yves is already waiting for you in the back." When she had finally made it to him she noticed Hermione next to him.

"Hey Brita" he said "This is my best friend Hermione Granger" The two girls eyed each other for a minute before Brita, if possible, grinned wider and stuck out her hand to shake Hermione's.

"Hi! Nice to meet you!" Hermione liked her instantly.

"Hey, its nice to meet you also!"

"You say Yves is waiting for me?" she nodded enthusiastically.

"You can go ahead and go to the back if you'd like."

"I will but I'd like to ask a favor of you." She looked at him expectantly. "You see Hermione here is in need of an entire new wardrobe." Hermione snapped her head in his direction.

"Harr-!" he rolled his eyes and looked into hers.

"No 'Mi. You've done a lot for me the least I could do is give you a bit of a treat. I want you to get anything you want" Not giving her a chance to protest he smiled at Brita and walked away. When he passed the girl he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"Make sure she gets anything and everything she wants." She nodded and grabbed Hermione's arm.

"Come on, I have a feeling this will take a while." She said as she pulled her to another side of the store. Smiling at the glare Hermione threw over her shoulder he walked to the back of the store. Yves was

leaning against the wall next to the small door. As soon as he saw Harry his face lit up.

"There you are!" he said "I have been waiting for you! Come, follow me." Smiling he followed the man into the tailoring room. Yves closed the door behind them and handed him a pile of black fabric.

"Put this on." Harry looked down at the clothing in his hand and back up at the tall man who was looking at him expectantly.

"Um, you want me to take off my clothes?" Harry asked. Yves sighed.

"Just take off the pants; you can keep your shirt on. I'll turn around." He turned and faced the door. As quickly as possible Harry took off his jeans and pulled the suit pants and the jacket. It was a simple two piece black suit.

Harry cleared his throat, signaling that he was done. Yves turned back around and looked him up and down, slowly walking around him.

"Hmm, it needs to be taken in a bit." He directed Harry to one of the wooden stools. "Stand there please." When Harry was on the stool the man walked over to a shelf and pulled out a small wooden case. He walked back to Harry and began to take in the suit.

"So" he said, a slight smile appearing on his face. "Who was the young woman you came in with?"

"My friend Hermione." Yves looked up from where he was hemming the bottom of the pants and smirked.

"Friend, huh?" Harry colored slightly.

"Yeah, best friend." The man went back to his work but continued speaking.

"I understand. I had a best friend like that. We were incredibly close, she and I. We had been friends since we were very young, as our parents were close. We rarely spent any time apart."

“What happened to her?” Harry asked. Yves stood up and grinned at him.

“I married her.” He stepped away and pulled a curtain away from a fool-length mirror.

“Now, tell me how you like it!”

Harry turned and looked at himself in the mirror. He had to admit. He looked pretty good. The suit fit him perfectly (as you can expect a tailored suit to), the black of the fabric with the darkness of his hair brought out the intense color of his eyes. He couldn't stop the smirk the filled his face.

“I like it.”

An hour later Harry bid farewell to Yves and left the room. Six brand new suits in his arms.

Not seeing Hermione and Brita he went to the counter where Barry was standing.

“Hey Harry!” he said

“Hey, could you keep these with you for a while?” Harry asked, handing the suits to him.

“Sure mate.”

“Thanks. Did you by any chance see Brita and another girl around here?” Barry grinned.

“Oh yeah” he jerked his thumb behind him. “They went that way.” Thanking Barry he strolled off in that direction.

He found them standing by the women's dressing rooms laughing and talking. He stopped short when he saw Hermione. She was wearing a knee length dark blue, spaghetti strap crinkle cotton dress that hugged her body. Seeing his reflection in the mirror on one of the dressing room doors she turned to him.

"Harry!" she said "How do I look?" she struck a pose, causing Brita to giggle. He was at a loss for words.

"...Absolutely amazing!" A flush made its way onto Hermione's face and she put her head down causing her hair to fall into her face. Before the brown waves covered her face he caught her pleased expression. Brita was looking between the two of them, a small grin forming on her face.

"Well..." she cleared her throat. "I'm almost done, I just wanted to try this on before we left." She looked at herself in the mirror and ran her fingers over the fabric wistfully.

"Just trying it on? You *have* to buy it!" Brita exclaimed "You look absolutely gorgeous in it!" Hermione twirled slightly but shook her head.

"I couldn't, its way to expensive!"

"Mi" Harry gave an exasperated sigh. "I told you to get anything you want, no matter how much it costs." He nudged her towards one of the dressing rooms. "Now go get dressed." Walking into one of the stalls she gave him a narrowed eyed look over her shoulder.

"Don't get used to ordering me around Harry James Potter!" he just grinned at her. While Hermione changed out of the dress Harry and Brita brought the piles of clothes that she and Hermione had accumulated to the counter.

"I need a boyfriend like you Harry." Brita said "Hermione is so lucky. Not only are you gorgeous but you take her on shopping sprees!" Choosing to ignore the comment on his looks Harry shook his head.

"Hermione isn't my girlfriend, we're just friends" Brita eyebrows disappeared into her bangs and Barry stopped ringing up the clothes and gave him an incredulous look.

"You're telling me that you're spending all this money on a girl you aren't even dating?!" Harry gave him a small smile.

"She's my best friend" he stated, as if it explained everything. Giving him a weird look Barry went back to ringing up the clothing. Soon Hermione came to stand by them, laying the dress on top of the rest of the clothes. Despite her protests he could see the gleam of joy in her eyes when she looked at it.

"Are we going back home after this Harry?" she asked. He shrugged.

"I don't know, if you want to I guess."

"I was hoping we could stop at the bookstore." She said, pointing out the door and to a large bookstore across the way. He grinned at her.

"I hadn't even noticed it though I bet you can spot one a mile away." She slapped him hard on the chest and placed her hands on her hips.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" he gave her a wide-eyed innocent look, which was spoiled by the smirk on his lips.

"Are you insinuating that I was somehow insulting you?!" she just snorted at him and took the bags that Barry was handing to her.

After paying for their purchases Harry and Hermione said goodbye to Barry and Brita. Laden down with bags they left the store, Hermione excitedly led them across the crowded walkway and straight to the large bookstore, a huge grin on her face.

"A bit excited are we?" Harry teased. She ignored him and shifted the bags in her hands so she could open the door to the store. She struggled with the door but she still couldn't open it with the shopping bags in her hands. She fought with it for a couple of seconds before Harry put his down and opened it for her, smirking as he did so. Shooting him a sharp look she walked through the door "accidentally" trodding on his foot which quickly wiped the smug look from his face. Gathering the bags he had placed on the ground he followed after her, all the while muttering about temperamental women.

Being in there with her was like being with a kid in a candy store. She roamed up and down nearly every aisle and after a while Harry stopped trying to follow her and with all the bags went and sat in a comfy chair in the magazine section. He had been sitting there for the

better part of an hour when a little girl in blue jean overalls with a pink t-shirt under it plopped herself next to him. She had honey blonde hair pulled back into two thick braids and large dark blue eyes.

“Hi!” she said brightly, her yellow rain boot clad feet swinging. He smiled down at her.

“Hello.”

“My name is Catherine! What yours?”

“Nice to meet you Catherine, I’m Harry.” Her little freckled nosed scrunched up.

“Hairy?” he grinned and shook his head.

“No, not Hairy *Harry*” the little girl gave him a blank look,

“I just said that!”

“What you said was *Hairy*, H-A-I-R-Y. My name is *Harry*, H-A-R-R-Y.”

“Oh! Okay.” She reached into the front pocket of her overalls and pulled out two lollypops, she handed one of the brightly colored sweets to Harry.

“Mummy says to never take candy from strangers!” she shoved her red lolly into her mouth. “So I guess I can just give you one.” She said from around her candy. She pulled the sweet from her mouth with an audible pop and grinned at him, her lips already tinged red.

“And plus I know your name so you’re not a stranger anymore!” giving the bubbly little girl a grin he popped the sweet in his hand into his mouth. A few minutes later a woman with the same honey blonde hair of the child next to him and brown eyes came jogging over to them, a relieved look on her face. She raced over to them and scooped the little girl up into her arms.

“Cattie! Don’t you ever run off like that again!” she scolded squeezing the tiny child to her chest. She turned her eyes to Harry.

"I'm sorry! I hope she wasn't bothering you." She said. Harry shook his head and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Not at all!" he lifted the sweet in his hand "She even gave me candy." Just as he finished his sentence Hermione rounded a corner and came toward the, a pile of books stack precariously in her arms. Letting out a long suffering sigh Harry walked to her and relived her of half her burden.

"Good lord 'Mi! Are you planning on restocking the library?!" she pursed her lips.

"No Harry, since most of my books are gone I need new ones to stock the bookcases in my room." She said. The woman gave them a small smile.

"Thank you for sitting with her, we really should be going." She readjusted the child in her arms and headed towards the door. Catherine waved over her shoulder.

"Bye Hairy!" when they were out of sight Hermione turned to Harry with an eyebrow raised.

"I leave you alone for a few minutes and you've already gone and found yourself a little girlfriend." He grinned down at her.

"Do I sense a bit of jealousy in your voice Hermione?" snorting she picked up a couple of the bags off the floor.

"Come on Harry, lets go pay for these." She began to walk to the sales counter. Picking up the rest of the bags and balancing the books he followed her.

"I see you're beginning to enjoy our little shopping trip."

"Well you *did* say it was my birthday gift!" After paying for the books they gathered all the bags and left the store.

"We have got to shrink some of this stuff." Hermione muttered to him as they waded through the milling crowd.

"You're right." Hermione spotted a door up ahead of them, with a jerk of her head she directed him towards it. When they were in front of it Harry stopped short. They were standing at the door to the women's lavatories.

"I can't go in there Hermione!" he exclaimed. Rolling her eyes at him she cracked the door open and peered inside.

"Don't be such a baby Harry. It's just a loo." Seeing that the coast was clear she walked in and pulled Harry in after her. Still feeling nervous Harry began to shrink their purchases, Hermione following suit. Once they were done they shoved everything into Harry's leather bag and left the tiled room.

They were at the doors of the shopping center when it happened. A huge explosion sent glass flying everywhere. Hermione and Harry threw themselves to the floor to avoid being cut by the flying debris. Numerous loud cracks sounded over the screams of the people. Harry and Hermione lifted their heads off the floor and all the color drained from both their faces. *"Death eaters."*

A/N: Wow, that one was even longer than the last! I hoped you all enjoyed it!

The next chapter will contain the attack of the death eaters, the meeting with Dumbledore, and finally Harry and Hermione will see Ron again. And of course the guitar. Thank y'all for reading!!

Chapter 10

“Deatheaters.”

“Did they see us?” Hermione whispered anxiously from her place on the ground beside him. He reached into his back pocket and grabbed his wand.

“I don’t think so.” He replied. How could they? There was mass pandemonium, people were running and screaming. The deatheaters were killing and torturing people left and right.

“Maybe we could make a run for it?” she asked and slid her wand from inside her pocket. Harry quickly scanned the area around them, there was no way they’d be able to escape undetected. Deatheaters were stationed at all visible exits, there were people trying to get out but it was no use, everyone was trapped.

“No, we wouldn’t make it.” He whispered. Taking a shaky breath he began to lift himself off the ground and into a crouch.

“Harry! What the hell are you doing?!” Hermione hissed at him, still on the ground.

“We can’t just sit here!” she eyed him for a minute then gave a determined nod and crouched next to him.

“What do you want to do?” she asked. He pressed his lips together and gave the room another quick scan. Four deatheaters were standing by the doors though they were otherwise occupied by two muggles they were torturing. He thought about trying to stun them and get out the door but there were also at least eight DE’s behind them that would surely kill them if they tried. Peering through the terrified crowd Harry spotted an elevator at the far end of the walkway. Narrowing his eyes in determination he turned to Hermione.

“Do you see that lift over there?” seeing her nod he continued. “When I count to three we’re going to run towards it.”

“What?!” she exclaimed

“One-”

“We’ll never make it!”

“Two-”

“They’ll catch us for sure Harry!”

“Three!” he grabbed her hand and sprinted through the crowd.

It was like they were going in slow motion. He could see the terror and confusion on the faces of those around him, hear their screams of pain and fear. The worst thing was that he couldn’t do anything, he couldn’t save all these people.

They were about halfway away from the lift when the first curse flew over their heads. It only missed Hermione by inches. Behind them six deatheaters were in hot pursuit.

“Shit!” Harry exclaimed. “**Stupefy!**” He started shooting spells over his shoulder. Hearing a dull thud behind him he assumed he hit one.

“Hermione!” he shouted at the girl next to him. “Go on ahead and push the up button, I’ll try to hold them off.” Nodding grimly she sprinted ahead and to the doors.

Harry turned to the deatheaters, his wand at his side but had to duck when a green light flew at him. A smirk blossomed on his lips.

“Now that wasn’t very nice! What have I ever done to you?” he said. One of the deatheater’s eyes narrowed behind his mask.

“Potter!” he spat out the name like a curse.

“The one and only.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw another deatheater raise his wand. None of them had a chance to stop him, the deatheater was stunned before the curse even left his lips. This seemed to spur the rest of them into action, in seconds Harry was under a barrage of spells.

“Amplus Contego!” a large dome of white pulsing light surrounded Harry and absorbed the curses. Seeing the shield absorb them surprised him, it wasn't supposed to withstand unforgivables. They seemed to be trying to incapacitate him instead of killing him. Another wave of spells hit his shield causing him to almost lose his footing, he could feel it weakening. It wouldn't be able to withstand another attack like that.

All of a sudden three of the death eaters hit the ground. Taking a quick glance behind him he saw Hermione standing by the door of the lift with her wand raised, a fierce look on her face. He could see the metal doors slowly opening behind her. Licking his lips he mentally counted to three. Getting to the number he dropped his shield and took off at a run to the doors. He heard one of the last two remaining death eaters curse and they took off after him, throwing curses as they went. He dodged a curse and shielded his face when it hit a shop window, causing glass to come flying towards him, a few shards cutting his face. He leaped over the body of an elderly man. The door was open.

“Get in Hermione! Get in!” he shouted as he ran. She ran into the metal box and raised her wand.

“Stupefy!” he heard her shout. He quickly ducked, the spell flew over his head and hit one of the death eaters.

“Close the door!” he watched as she hurriedly reached over and pushed the button. He felt something hit his side and he stumbled, nearly hitting the ground. It felt as if the entire left side of his body was on fire. He bit his tongue to keep himself from screaming and he glanced over his shoulder, the last death eater was still behind him and more were coming. The doors were sliding closed, he could feel blood soaking through his clothes and running down his arm, he could still hear the screams of the people around him and see lifeless bodies littering the ground. Another curse flew past, successfully hitting Hermione in the arm. She flew backward and hit the wall, she slid to the ground just as he vaulted through the rapidly closing doors. The doors slid shut with a ding, completely cutting off the screaming and shouting of the people they left behind. Without

thinking he pushed a random button and kneeled next to Hermione, ignoring the flare of pain that went through him when he did so.

She was pale, blood was running down her arm and her breathing was slightly labored.

“Bloody hell! Are you alright?!” he asked gently lifting her off the floor and leaning her against the wall.

“Never better.” She grunted. Wincing she pulled her injured arm to her chest and rolled up her sleeve. A large bloody gash ran from her shoulder blade and to her elbow.

“Cutting Charm.” She said. Picking up her wand she waved it over the wound.

“**Percuro**” the wound immediately stopped bleeding and the gash slowly began to close. Seemingly satisfied with her work Hermione rolled her sleeve back down and looked up at him, her eyes filling concern.

“Harry! What happened?” she slid over to him, a hand on her back, and hesitantly touched his side, he flinched slightly.

“One of the deatheaters hit me with something.” She pushed his jacket aside and gently lifted up his soaked shirt. She gave a sharp intake of breath.

“Is it that bad?” she nodded, unable to speak. She was right, it was bad. Like Hermione’s it was also a large gash but it ran from his ribs to his bellybutton. It was bleeding heavily and it was clearly a very deep wound.

“I-I don’t know if I can heal it.” She said. “At least not fully. I can stop the bleeding though.” Biting his lip he nodded haltingly. It hurt like hell, he felt like someone was holding a red hot poker under his skin. Narrowing her eyes in concentration Hermione wove her wand above the gash.

“Sano Sanatio” the laceration stopped bleeding and skin slowly grew over it. The pain lessened and he let himself breathe. He looked up at her and smiled.

“Thanks ‘Mi.” she smiled back and carefully leaned herself against back wall.

“What are friends for?” he slid over so he was next to her and leaned against the wall. They sat in silence and watched the numbers on top of the door change. They had already gone up two floors in the short time they’d been in the elevator.

3...

“What are we going to do?” Hermione whispered, her eyes still on the dial. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

4...

“I don’t know” she swallowed thickly.

5...

“All those people! I couldn’t even-I didn’t even help them!” he pushed himself from the wall, wincing slightly, and sat in front of her so she was forced to look at him.

6...

“We couldn’t have helped them Hermione.” He said solemnly. “It happened to fast. There was just too many deatheaters.”

“So what are we going to do Harry? Run? Are we just going to leave all these people to their deaths?!” Harry looked at her, his face fierce and his eyes blazing.

7...

“No. We will save as many people as we can and we will take down as many of those sons-of-bitches as we can.” Hermione stared into his eyes and then nodded firmly.

DING!

They both shot to their feet, their wands at the ready. As soon as the door opened the sound of anguished screams flooded in.

Taking a deep breath Harry peeked around the door. More bodies littered the ground, their eyes open and wide in terror. Their expressions were cruel and agonized at the same time. Mouths were twisted into ugly grimaces of pain and fear and standing about ten feet away with their backs to him were four deatheaters. They were standing over two people and from the sound of their screams and the laughter of the deatheaters they had them under the Cruciatus Curse.

He pulled his head back into the lift and looked at Hermione. Her face was grim and he could see the anger burning in her eyes. He gave her a nod, she took a deep breath and raised her wand, Harry following her movement. They stepped out of the elevator and began sending out stunners. It was over before it began, the deatheaters were down in seconds and the screaming had stopped.

One of the bodies on the ground began to stir, the small person lifted themselves up and crawled to the other.

Harry and Hermione jogged over to the people and received a nasty shock.

On the ground was little Catherine and her Mom.

Catherine was kneeling next to her mother squeezing her hand, the woman was shaking, and blood was bubbling out of her mouth. Her once bright honey colored hair was matted with blood and her eyes were gaining a slight glazed look. She had been under the curse too long, her body was failing.

They knelt next to the little girl and her mother.

"Mummy!" the little girl shouted, tears running down her face. "Come on Mummy, you have to get up!" The woman turned her pained brown eyes to her daughter. She took a labored breath.

"Listen to me baby girl." She croaked "I want you to know that I love you." The little girl shook her head furiously. The tears were coming hard and fast.

"I love you more than you'll ever know." She squeezed her eyes shut in pain, her back arching off the floor. Gritting her teeth she forced herself to open her eyes again and looked at Harry.

"Take care of her..." she whispered to him. He could only nod mutely.

The woman looked back at her daughter, her anguished eyes were filled with tears and her lips were trembling.

"I'm so sorry Cattie" she squeezed her child's hand one last time. Her back arched again. A sigh escaped her lips her body relaxed, her eyes became blank and empty, and the hand that was in the little girl's hand became limp.

"No" her eyes widened. "No! Mommy!" she threw herself onto her mothers still chest, and began shaking her.

"Please wake up! *Please Mommy! Wake up!*" she screamed. "Don't leave me! *Please!*" Harry lifted the heartbroken little girl off her mother and pulled her to his chest. She threw her arms around him and buried her face in the nape of his neck, sobs shaking her tiny body.

"Shh, it's going to be alright." he murmured to the small child "you're going to be ok. I'll take care of you".

Lifting his eyes from the child in his arms he looked at Hermione who was crouching beside the still body of Catherine's mother. Her eyes met his and she shook her head, tears were running freely down her face. He closed his eyes and held the child closer. He knew what she would have to go through, the kind of pain she would feel, she was going to remember this for the rest of her life. *"No more. I will not let another child suffer like this."*

Harry stood up, the girl still in his arms, and Hermione stood with them. She looked at the now sniffing little girl, and her eyes met his again.

He could see it in her eyes, she also understood the pain this little girl was going to have to endure.

“What do we do now?” Hermione asked grimly.

“We need to get out of here. We need to create a distraction-” he was interrupted by the sound of footsteps thundering up the stairwell. He looked at the door then at Hermione, his eyes met hers.

“Run?”

“Run.” He wrapped his arms firmly around the child in his grasp and took off. They ran down the aisle, dodging around fallen clothes racks and twisted bodies. They could hear the door burst open behind them.

“Over there!” Hermione hissed at him, pointing to a makeup counter. They sprinted over to it and hid behind it.

“Where the hell did they go?!” one of the death eaters said.

“They’re here somewhere.” a cold voice drawled. Harry’s eyes narrowed, he knew that voice. “Potter and his little mudblood. The dark lord will be pleased”

“*Malfoy.*” Next to him he could see Hermione’s eyes narrow and she pressed her lips together. The child in his lap whimpered.

“Did you hear that?” someone asked. He could hear someone walking, their footsteps echoing eerily in the sudden silence. He pressed himself closer to the counter and as carefully as he could he handed Catherine to Hermione. She wrapped her arms tightly around the little girl and held her breath.

The person’s shadow was getting closer, if they kept going they would surely spot them.

Harry lifted his wand and muttered something, a mannequin on the other side of the room suddenly jumped off its display and ran across the walkway. The death eaters all turned and chased after it. As soon as they disappeared around the corner Harry and Hermione jumped from under the counter and dashed the opposite way.

There was a crash behind them and someone started cursing furiously.

"I guess they figured out my little trick." Harry muttered. There was a second door to the stairwell ahead of them. Harry pulled the door open.

"We need to get out of here."

"We're six floors up Harry!" A red light flashed by them and hit a potted plant, soil flew everywhere.

"Either six floors or dead." She hurriedly stepped through the door. Harry closed the door behind him. Hermione slid the silent child to her hip and aimed her wand at the door.

"**Colloportus!**" the door flashed. Harry placed a hand on the small of Hermione's back and began to quickly steer her and Catherine down the steps.

"I'm not sure how long that will hold them, hopefully it'll buy us some time." He said.

"We won't be able to make all six floors before they get the door open." Hermione stated. "We should go to the fourth floor then take the lift the rest of the way down."

They had gone down two floors when the door gave way.

"Damn it!" Harry exclaimed. They sped up, running as fast as possible down the steps. One of the masked villains rounded the corner, Harry quickly cast a spell.

"**Impedimenta!**" the deatheater slowed down immediately. "**Incarcerous!**" Ropes twined around his body and he fell down the steps. More came rushing after the fleeing couple and the child. Both Harry and Hermione were shooting spells over their shoulders but without looking where they were aiming they only managed to hit two of the six deatheaters chasing them, not counting the one that Harry had already brought down. There was a door ahead of them; it seemed Hermione had the same ideas as Harry because instead of

continuing down the stairs she kept running straight towards the door. She had grabbed the handle and was wrenching the door open when a flash of red light hit her in the back. She hit the ground hard, her body protecting Catherine from injury.

"Hermione!" *"Oh please god, no!"* He dropped next to the girl and gently lifted Catherine off her body. The little girl's eyes had widened and she backed herself into the wall, pulling her knees to her chest. Her eyes were locked on Hermione's still form and she was shaking her head back and forth. Kneeling next to Hermione he saw that her chest was still rising and falling, the relief that rushed through him was amazing. She had only been stunned.

A shadow fell over him and a cold laugh reached his ears. The deatheaters had surrounded them.

"Oh no! Did Potter's little mudblood get hurt?" he knew that voice, the high mocking voice that haunted his nightmares. Harry's eyes darkened and his fingers tightened around his wand. He slowly stood and faced the three deatheaters around him, his eyes focused on one in particular.

"Aww! I think he's angry!" she mocked. He raised his wand.

"What are you going to do Potter? Try to crucio me again?" he could practically hear the sneer in her voice. With a growl of hatred Harry aim his wand at the ground near their feet.

"Reducto!" The spell was a lot stronger than he expected. The cement quaked and splintered. The three deatheaters flew into the air. The largest of the three only flew back a few feet but he hit the ground headfirst, he was completely still and blood was pooling beneath his head. The second deatheater fell through a hole created by the curse, his screams echoed through the stair well until they were abruptly cut off. As for Bellatrix she being the main focus of Harry's anger got the worst of it. When the curse hit she flew into the air and into the stairs, when she collided with it one of the poles from the metal banisters broke in half. The thick metal pole went right through her stomach. Her mask fell off, her face was twisted in pain and hatred and blood was beginning to flow from her nose and mouth. She glared at him as she struggled for breath.

“Who’s the monster now Potter?” she spat. His blazing eyes met hers.

“You are.” He turned his back on the now dying woman and again kneeled next to Hermione and Catherine. Neither had moved, Hermione was still unconscious and Catherine was still curled up next to the wall. Her dark blue eyes wide and staring.

He lifted his wand to enervate Hermione when the ground gave a mighty shake. Harry hit the ground. Large pieces of plaster came raining down around them and huge chunks of cement fell from the floor, the hole Harry had created becoming larger. Harry quickly reached out and pulled the almost catatonic child over to him. With one arm around her he once again lifted his wand to revive Hermione.

He saw it at the last minute. Hearing the little girl next to him gasp he looked at her, she was staring up at the ceiling in horror. An enormous piece of the ceiling directly above them had broken away and was rapidly beginning to descend. He knew he wouldn’t have a chance to shield them. Automatically he bent his body over Hermione and the child. He squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the piece of debris to come tumbling down and crush them. He waited for the oncoming pain.

When nothing happened he hesitantly cracked open his eyes and his mouth dropped open. Crouching under him Catherine had her tiny hands lifted up and a large blue and purple dome of magic was surrounding them. Her large dark blue eyes were filled with shock and she stared at him in absolute confusion and fear. He gently grabbed her small hands in his and lowered them, as he did the shield also began to lower. She was shaking and she looked terrified.

“Its ok, love.” He murmured to the shaken child. “*She’s a witch?!’*”. When the shield was completely down Harry let go of her hands. She pulled them to herself and stared down at them in horror. Another shake of the room forced his mind back into action. He waved his wand over Hermione.

“**Enervate.**” Her eyes flew open and she shot up. She did a quick scan of the room, taking in the destruction and the bodies of the two deatheaters.

“What happened?” were the first words out of her mouth. Harry just shook his head and gently helped her into a standing position.

“I’ll tell you later, right now we have to get out of here before the entire ceiling falls on our heads.” He reached down to the still shocked little girl and picked her up. Wrapping his free arm around Hermione’s waist they walked through the door, or in Hermione’s case, limped.

When they the door they were met with complete silence. With their wands at the ready they cautiously stepped into the room, a terrible sight met their eyes. Harry quickly reached up and pressed Catherine’s head into his shoulder, she didn’t need to see this.

“Oh god.” Hermione said in a horrified whisper. All Harry could do was shake his head mutely.

All around them were bodies. Hundreds of bodies all around them. There bodies were twisted in the most grotesque positions, their faces frozen in expressions of fear and pain. Blood was splattered on some walls and many of the people were missing limbs.

The deatheaters had really outdone themselves.

Forcing down the bile that had begun to rise in his throat he and the girls left the doorway and began to walk down the walkway. As soon as the three of them made it to the middle of the room several loud cracks sounded around them. Standing back to back Harry and Hermione lifted their wands; Catherine wrapped her arms even tighter around Harry.

Several witches and wizards had surrounded them, all with their wands aimed directly at the three minors. They were all dressed in black battle robes trimmed in gold. A woman lowered her wand and stepped forward.

“Harry?” A wizard next to her looked at her furiously.

“Tonks!” he barked. “They could have killed these people!” The woman, now revealed as Tonks, turned and shot him an ugly look.

“Come off it Westin!” she said. “They’ve obviously been attacked and he’s holding a child!” by now at least half of the Aurors had lowered their wands and were staring at them in interest.

“Look around! All these people are dead but they’re perfectly fine?!” Tonks opened her mouth to respond. Harry was quickly getting tired of them and so was Hermione.

“Where the hell were you people?!” he snapped at them. The one named Westin turned his eyes back to them. Tonks stepped closer to them.

“The deatheaters had erected an anti-apparation shield and we couldn’t get in.” she said. “There was some sort of wave of magic and the shield fell. Are you guys ok?”

The anger dissipated and a feeling of absolute exhaustion fell over him. Hermione lowered her wand and came to stand beside him.

“Just dandy.” She said.

An hour later Harry, Hermione, and Catherine were sitting at a table in what remained of the food court with the now neon green haired Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt. After they had been healed of their injuries they had told the two Aurors all that had happened, well all except what exactly had happened to the three deatheaters in the stairwell.

“We need to get a message to Dumbledore.” Kingsley said. Hermione snorted and Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“No.” he said firmly. Kingsley’s eyebrows shot up and Tonks sighed.

“Harry” she said “I know that you and Dumbledore have had your problems but this is serious.” She glanced at the child that was now nestled in Hermione’s arms. “And things will get a lot more complicated without him” Hermione looked directly into Tonks’s eyes.

“What’s going to happen to her?” she asked. Tonks’s eyes met Kingsley’s; he turned his dark eyes to the teen.

“From what you have told us she has shown signs of magical powers and as she seems to have been orphaned she will be made a ward of the ministry and put into an orphanage.” Hermione’s eyes widened and she pulled the almost catatonic child closer to her. Harry set his jaw and crossed his arms. “She’s still young, only six years old. Someone can adopt her.”

“There’s nothing else that can be done.” Agreed Tonks though her eyes looked pained when she spoke those words. “It’s the best thing that can be done for her at the moment.”

“Best thing that can be done my ass!” Harry thought angrily.

He could practically feel the anger radiating off of Hermione. He went to take her hand when he saw her lift her wand under the table and flick it. The skylight above the entrance exploded causing glass to rain down on the Aurors and stunned deatheaters. Tonks and Kingsley jumped up from the table and ran through the door.

“Stay here!” Tonks shouted over her shoulder. As soon as they were gone Hermione got up from the table and with her free hand grabbed Harry’s arm and began pulling him to the emergency exit.

“We have to get out of here before they come back!” she said.

“What did you do?” pushing open the door she shrugged.

“The same thing you did earlier, I created a distraction.” They ran down the sidewalk and cut across the parking lot to his bike. Hermione stopped short and readjusted the little girl.

“How will we all ride on that Harry?” he reached over to the seat and pressed a gray button on the side of it. The leather seat enlarged, it could now easily fit three people.

“Oh.”

Harry opened the compartment and pulled out the two helmets. He handed them to Hermione and Catherine, pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his bag and swung onto the bike. Hermione placed the unresponsive child behind him and put the helmet on her, it

immediately shrunk to fit her head. Putting on her own helmet she sat behind the little girl, wrapping her arms around her and Harry they peeled out of the parking lot.

He pushed the bike to its limit; the world around them appeared as nothing more than a blur of color.

They made it back to the cottage in half the time, Harry drove as if the very devil was at their feet. After pulling up next to the steps Harry got off the bike and lifted Catherine off and placed her on the ground, she immediately latched onto his hand, her devastatingly blue eyes wide and fearful.

"It's ok hun." He murmured to her. Her grip loosened slightly but didn't let go. Hermione took her other hand and together they made their way up the steps. Before they could even open the door it flew open. DeeDi stood in the doorway wringing her hands anxiously. She gasped and ran to them.

"Oh! Young Mistress and Master!" she exclaimed, taking in the state of their clothing. "What has happened?!"

"We're ok DeeDi." Hermione said tiredly. The elf nodded though she still looked worried. Turning her head she spotted the frightened child that was still clutching the two teens.

"Why hello there little miss!" the little girl hid her face in Harry's side and DeeDi gave her a small smile.

"You must come inside before you all get sick!" Heeding her advice they stepped into the house. Catherine let go of their hands and looked around the vast hall in complete wonder, she turned her wide questioning eyes to Harry.

"This is where you'll be staying for a while, if that's ok with you?" she nodded. She hadn't spoken since they had left her mother. Hermione brushed a strand of hair from the little girl's face and took a good look at her. She was filthy, half of her hair had come out of her braid, there was a hole in her jumper, blood was smeared on her cheek and clothes, and she was only wearing one boot.

“Catherine?” she stopped gazing around the room and turned her eyes to Hermione. “Do you want to go get cleaned up?” she asked the child. Catherine nodded. Lifting the child into her arms Hermione turned to DeeDi.

“DeeDi, could you please find something for Catherine to wear?” she reluctantly asked the elf. She had been living with Harry for almost three weeks but she still wasn’t used to or too happy about having the house-elves do things for them. DeeDi gave a nod and popped away.

“Do you mind if we use your bathroom Harry??”

“Of course not.” He said forcing down a yawn. After he watched them disappear up the stairs he let himself sag against the wall. A deep weariness had settled in his bones, it was only the afternoon and he felt like he’d been awake for months.

Pushing himself from the wall he dragged himself up the stairs, he was fully ready to just fall into his bed and sleep for the next week. Stepping into his room he dropped his bag on the floor and pulled off his jacket. Sighing he threw himself into his bed, he could hear water running in his bathroom.

He was half asleep when the door to the bathroom opened and Hermione and Catherine stepped out. The little girl was now clean. DeeDi had found her an ankle-length silk pink nightgown and her shining blonde locks were pulled back in to two braids. She was holding Hermione’s hand tightly in hers.

“Feel better?” he asked her. She nodded. Harry got out of the bed and grabbed some sweatpants and a t-shirt.

“I’m going to go take a shower.” He said to Hermione. She looked just as exhausted as he felt. She nodded, unable to speak around the yawn that split her mouth.

After pulling off his blood spattered clothing he stepped into the shower. Letting himself lean into the warm spray, letting it soothe his tired muscles. In that moment of rest thoughts came rushing through his head. *“What am I going to do?! I can’t take care of a kid! But I*

couldn't have let the ministry get their hands on her." He groaned and cut off the water. *"We'll figure something out, hopefully."*

When he finally stepped out of the shower he wiped the steam from the mirror and peered at his reflection. He looked worn out. His eyes were half closed and his hair was even wilder than usual. He turned to the side, where the gash once was there was now a slight discoloration. Kingsley had informed him that because of the severity of the wound the scar would probably never truly fade. *"Just what I needed, another scar."*

"Ooh! That looks pretty nasty mate!" the mirror said to him. Sighing he pulled on his clothes and went back to his room. Hermione was kneeling on the floor surrounded by the shopping bags that they had accumulated earlier. She was at digging through one of the bags, pulling out a pair of pale blue pants a white shirt. Catherine was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Catherine?" Hermione's head snapped to him, a small smile appearing on her face.

"The poor little thing was completely exhausted! I tucked her into bed in my room." She stood up with the clothes bundled in her arms. Her expression became worried. "What are we going to do about her Harry?" he sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't really know 'Mi, I just couldn't bring myself to leave her with them." Hermione looked out the window, a faraway look entering her eyes.

"I know what you mean." She said softly "I kept thinking about what it was like in that-that *place* that I was in and I just couldn't let her go through that!" she took a shaky breath and looked back at him. "I don't know what we're going to do but I will make sure that she *never* has to be alone." He stepped closer to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"She won't be. We'll be there for her." She gave him a watery smile. He leaned over and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Have I ever told you that you're a really sweet guy Harry?" he blushed a bit. She was looking up at him, her warm brown eyes sparkling with unshed tears. *"God I love her."* He froze. *"What the hell?! I don't love her! We'll she's is my best friend of course I love her but-"*

"Harry?" he was snapped out of his thoughts. Hermione was looking up at him with a confused expression on her face. He could feel the blush working its way to his face.

"You kind of zoned out on me there." She was grinning at him now. He let go of her shoulders and took a step back.

"Sorry." There was an awkward pause.

"I'm just gonna go take a bath." he nodded. As soon as she left the room he threw himself onto the bed and groaned. *"What is wrong with me? Why do I keep thinking about her this way? I mean she has always been there for me, she's the only person I know that has never turned their back on me and I love her for that but I'm not in love with her! Am I?"* He pulled the covers over his head. *"I mean yeah, she's loyal, intelligent, kind, generous, and gorgeous and I couldn't live without her. She's the most important person in my life and I'd give my life for her in an instant. Does that mean that I love her?"* he heard the door swing open; he pulled the blanket from his face and sat up. Hermione stood in the doorway, toweling off her dark brown curls, her clothes hung loosely from her body and her feet were bare. She yawned widely.

"I feel like I haven't slept in ages!" She grinned at him, her face slightly flushed from the heat of her bath, her hair hanging damp and loose down her back and looking terribly small in her clothes. He felt the air leave his lungs, it was like he had just been punched in the stomach. It was like everything had been turned upside down.

"Bloody hell! I'm in love with her!" she must have noticed the absolute dumbstruck look on his face because her expression became worried.

"Harry? Are you alright?" she asked cautiously stepping over to the bed. She placed a hand on his arm and he flinched mightily. An alarmed look came upon her face.

“Harry! What’s wrong?” his face was completely red now.

“No-Nothing’s wrong” he stammered “You just surprised me is all.”

“You sure?” she asked, giving him a doubtful look. He nodded jerkily. Dropping the subject she walked to the windows and closed all the curtains, Harry’s eye watching her every move. When the room was successfully darkened she walked back over to the bed and slipped in next to him. He nearly screamed when he felt her leg brush against his.

“Goodnight Harry.” She murmured, her eyes already closed. He swallowed thickly.

“ ’Night, ‘Mi”

He watched her as she slept. Entranced by the way her lips parted ever so slightly, the way her hair fanned across the pillows. He knew that there was no way he’d be getting any sleep, his mind was way to full. Not only with the realization of his feelings for Hermione but every time he closed his eyes the images from the attack flew to mind. The faces of the people, their fear and pain. The face of Catherine’s mother as she said her last words to her daughter, and the anguish in Catherine’s face. He knew that they would be burned in his memory forever.

Four hours later he was still wide awake. Either he was plagued with thoughts of the attack or Hermione would move or snuggle closer to him. Usually having her so close didn’t bother him, heck he quite enjoyed it when she snuggled close to him but tonight every time she touched him, every time she took a breath or made a noise his heart began to beat faster. She was driving him crazy! Finally he could take no more, he forced himself to leave Hermione’s embrace. As quietly as he could he got out of bed, closing the hangings behind him he walked to a shelf by his window and pulled down his mother’s guitar. Gently he placed the case on the small table in front of the fireplace. Before he opened it he walked back to the bed and cast a silencing charm on the hangings, he knew how tired Hermione was and he didn’t want to wake her. That done he went back to the fireplace and sat in one of his chairs, with a content sigh he opened the case, a small smile crept onto his face. Reverently he lifted the beautifully

carved instrument out of its velvet lined bed. As soon as he held it in his hands he felt peace run over him, finally the raging torrent of though slowed and he could finally breathe. He had forgotten how much he loved the guitar. He felt completely comfortable, the fire was the only thing that lit the room. His eyes slid closed and his fingers flowed over the strings.

Darling, Those Tired Eyes

Go With Me All the Time

And In The Dead Of Night

Tell Me You Will Be Mine

Where Do You Go To, Pretty Babe?

Where Do You Go To When The Night Winds Away?

Ask Me So Sweetly, What Do I Do?

And Who Do I Sing For?

Well Honey, I Sing about You

You... You...

After both the last notes of the song and his voice trailed off he heard a quiet clapping. His eyes flew open and his head snapped towards the sound. Leaning against the fireplace was Hermione, she had a soft smile on her face and she was looking at him in slight wonder.

"That was beautiful Harry" she said softly. A bit embarrassed he shrugged.

"Did I wake you?" she shook her head and came to sit in the chair next to him.

"No. I woke up and you weren't next to me." She looked away from him with a bit of a blush. "I guess I got a little scared so I got up and when I opened the hangings I heard you singing." His eyes widened and his face turned a few more shade of red.

"I was singing?!" she met his eyes and a grin lit her face.

"Yeah, and you sounded pretty good if I might say." He looked down at his lap and blushed again. It was like now everything she said to him brought heat rushing to his face.

"Where did you get that guitar?" she asked in a slightly awed voice. Harry stroked the instrument lovingly.

"It was my Mum's." he said softly. Her eyes widened. "I found it while I was cleaning the Dursley's attic."

"Oh." There was a moment of comfortable silence.

"Will you play me a song?" his eyes snapped to hers.

"Err...I don't know 'Mi. I've never played for anyone else before."

"Oh come on, please Harry?" she pouted at him and her eyes got really round. Her puppy dog look was firmly in place. *"She knows I can't say no to that! Why does she have to be so damn cute?!"*

"Don't do that to me Hermione!" she just continued to pout. "Fine!"

A delighted look crossed her face and she settled herself back into the chair. He took a deep breath and once again closed his eyes, his fingers taking their place on the guitar.

Love of mine some day you will die
But I'll be close behind
I'll follow you into the dark

No blinding light or tunnels to gates of white
Just our hands clasped so tight
Waiting for the hint of a spark
If Heaven and Hell decide
That they both are satisfied
Illuminate the No's on their vacancy signs

If there's no one beside you
When your soul embarks
Then I'll follow you into the dark

In Catholic school as vicious as Roman rule
I got my knuckles bruised by a lady in black
And I held my tongue as she told me
"Son fear is the heart of love"
So I never went back

If Heaven and Hell decide
That they both are satisfied
Illuminate the No's on their vacancy signs

If there's no one beside you
When your soul embarks
Then I'll follow you into the dark

You and me have seen everything to see
From Bangkok to Calgary
And the soles of your shoes are all worn down
The time for sleep is now
It's nothing to cry about
Cause we'll hold each other soon
The blackest of rooms

If Heaven and Hell decide
That they both are satisfied
Illuminate the No's on their vacancy signs

If there's no one beside you
When your soul embarks
Then I'll follow you into the dark
Then I'll follow you into the dark

When his eyes opened again he saw Hermione sitting in the chair,
her eyes were filled with tears and she was staring at him intensely.

"Was I that bad?" he asked awkwardly. She shook her head and
brushed the tears from her eyes.

"No." she said thickly. "It was very, very good. Where did you learn those?"

"Well the first song was actually one my mother wrote, and the second" he blushed a bit "I wrote that one." She shook her head, an amazed look on her face.

"You're full of surprises." He couldn't help the lopsided grin that appeared on his face. He opened his mouth to reply when there was a tentative knock on his door. He met Hermione's eyes with a raised brow, she shrugged in return. After placing the guitar back in its case Harry stood from the chair and went to the door, Hermione close behind.

A timid Molby stood in the doorway wringing his little hands.

"What's wrong Molby?" Harry asked.

"It's the little miss!" the elf exclaimed. "She is crying!" Harry met Hermione's worried gaze.

"I'll go check on her." She said. She gave his hand a squeeze before she followed the anxious elf down the hallway. He went back over to the fireplace and put away the guitar. He waited for a few minutes but he was starting to feel worried about his charge, he knew Hermione could take care of it but that didn't stop him from worrying. He left his room and padded down the dark hallway to the room where Catherine was sleeping, as quietly as he could he cracked open the door and peeked in, he was struck by the sight. Hermione was sitting on the large bed with Catherine cradled in her lap. She was rocking her gently and murmuring soft words in her ears, every once in a while a small sob or a sniffle could be heard from the child. Moonlight shone brightly from the window and bathed them both in its soft glowing light.

If it was possible he fell even more in love with Hermione than he thought he ever could. It almost scared him. The intensity of the emotions that flowed through him, he had never felt anything like this before. Hermione's eyes moved from the child in her arms and met his, she gave him a small nod. He returned it and left the doorway

and went back to his room. He laid down on the bed and let his thoughts overrun his mind.

Twenty minutes later Hermione walked through the door, a sleeping Catherine in her arms.

"I couldn't leave her by herself." She whispered. He only nodded and lifted the covers on the bed. Giving him a smile she walked over to the bed and placed the child under the covers next to Harry. Luckily the bed was ridiculously large and could fit them all comfortably. She slid into the bed next to them and soon they had all finally drifted to sleep.

When Harry woke the next morning he was even more tangled than usual. Hermione had her head tucked into the crook of his neck and her legs were twined with his. Catherine was sprawled across them with her head on Harry's stomach, a hand was gripping his shirt and the other in her mouth. There was no way he was getting out of bed without waking them and truthfully he didn't really want to. He felt content, with the familiar feeling of Hermione next to him and the comfortable weight of the little girl on his chest. He laid there in the large bed listening to their soft breathing, enjoying the warmth and peace that filled his chest. *"I could get used to this."* About an hour later the little girl cracked her big blue eyes open and blinked a few times, she looked around the room confused before her gaze latched onto Harry's face.

"Good morning, Cattie" he whispered. She sat up on his stomach and yawned. "Are you ready to get up?"

She nodded. He untangled Hermione's arms from his neck and sat up, he lifted the child off of him and sat her next to him. After carefully removing his legs from Hermione's he got out of the bed and stretched, the little girl still watching him. He checked his watch, it was only about 6am. He smiled down at Catherine and she lifted her arms. He lifted her from the bed and walked away from it.

"You want to go take a bath or go get breakfast?" she pointed to the bathroom door. "Bath first?"

Nod. Remembering she didn't have any clothes he set her on the floor (she immediately latched on to his pants leg), maybe he could transfigure something for her. He went to get his wand from the table in front of the fireplace where he had left it last night when he spotted a small pile of clothing. Walking over to it (Catherine at his heels) he picked it up. It was a soft baby blue sweater, a dark blue and white plaid skirt, black mary-janes, and a pair of knee-high white socks. There was even a little dark blue headband. *"DeeDi must have done this."* He thought, a smile appearing on his face. He held up the clothes to the little girl beside him.

"What do you think?" she smiled slightly and nodded. It was the first time he'd seen her smile since the attack.

"Can you take a bath by yourself?" he asked. She gave him a slightly indignant look and nodded firmly. He grinned.

"Ok, I'll go run the water." He handed her the clothes and she followed him into the bathroom. He lifted her up and placed her on the counter and she watched as he ran the water. He asked her questions while they waited for the tub to fill, hoping to get her to talk but she kept her mouth firmly closed. It only took a couple of minutes for the tub to fill, when it did he lifted her off the counter and back onto the floor.

"I'll be right outside if you need anything, ok?" once again she nodded. He was walking out the door when he felt a tug on his pants, he looked down at the little girl who was staring up at him expectantly.

"What's the matter?" he asked. She pointed to her hair. He gave her a confused look. "I don't understand. What is it that you want?" she gave him an impatient look and stumped her foot.

"She wants you to take her hair down" an amused voice said from behind him. He whipped around to see Hermione standing in the doorway with a smile on her face. She stepped around him and gently took the braid out of Catherine's hair. Once she was finished she turned back to him with a smug look. He glared at her.

"Well how was I supposed to know that?" she rolled her eyes and pushed him out the door.

“You’re such a boy Harry.”

Harry waited outside the door like he promised while Hermione went to another bathroom to take her morning shower. He quickly pulled on some jeans and a t-shirt while she was gone. Fifteen minutes later she returned fully dressed and glowing. She was wearing a pair of form fitting dark jeans and a fitted v-neck sleeveless white shirt with bronze embroidery around the neckline. Her hair was loose and flowing down her back. She dropped into the chair next to him.

“Has she come out yet?” she asked.

“No.” he glanced at the door. “She’s probably fine though.” He said it more to himself than her. She gave him a soft smile.

“It’s only been a few minutes Harry.”

“I know.” He grumbled. Hermione’s expression became serious.

“I think we need to tell her about the magical world, about who she is.”

“You think she’ll believe us?”

“Of course, after all she’s seen she’s bound to. And plus she’s only six, it’s a lot easier for someone that young to believe in magic.”

Not even two seconds later the door to the bathroom opened and Catherine came out. She instantly walked over to them, reaching out for Harry. He lifted her into his lap and Hermione grinned at them.

“Are you ready for some breakfast?” she nodded. He readjusted his hold on her and stood up, they all went downstairs and to the family dining area. Food was already spread on the table for them. Catherine had almost not let him go, he had to put her in the chair and bring it as close to his as possible. She seemed desperately afraid that they would leave her.

After breakfast Hermione told him she was going to show Catherine around the gardens, she gave him a meaningful look. He knew she was going to tell her the truth.

Once Hermione and Catherine had left out the back door, Catherine walking though her hand was clutching Hermione's, he went upstairs and to the dueling room.

After saying hello to the two portraits he went into the room. The room was completely silent. He was alone. After closing the door behind him he walked to the middle of the room and sat legs crossed on one of the many mats on the floor.

He had spent the better part of his time trying to learn Occumency. Now with knowing the prophesy the last thing he needed was Voldermort breaking into his mind. Taking a deep breath he began to clear his mind. He let his eyes slip closed. He forced every thought, every memory out of his mind; he let the room fade from his awareness. He concentrated solely on his breathing, on the steady thump of his heartbeat. Soon he felt his muscles relax, his breathing become deeper, and his heartbeat slowed. When his mind was clear he began to build his shield.

About a week after they had begun Harry's training Hermione had found a book on the art of shielding your mind. Unlike Snape the author carefully explained *how* to clear his mind and block intrusions. He explained that to build a shield it helped to picture a brick wall. To fill each and every single brick with his emotions and thoughts. He spent hours at a time carefully separating his memories and emotions and forcing them away. It always left him drained but he never felt the kind of pain he got when Snape had been teaching him.

Four hours later, with his shield about a third done he opened his eyes. Hermione was sitting on the mat in front of him, a tall glass of pumpkin juice in her hand. He smiled at her gratefully and gulped down the cool, sweet liquid. He was tired, sweat was running down his face and he was out of breath.

"Thanks 'Mi" he said once he had finished the drink.

"You're welcome." He glanced around the room.

"Where's Catherine?"

"She's in her room." She frowned slightly. His eyebrows shot up.

"She let you leave her?"

"Yeah, I think she was still a bit in shock after I told her about the wizarding world."

"How'd she take it?"

"Pretty good I guess but she is a little kid." Harry stood up and stretched and pulled Hermione up with him.

"What'd she say when you told her?" she snorted.

"Nothing." A concerned look crossed his face.

"I'm kind of worried about her, she hasn't said a word."

"I think she has Post-traumatic stress disorder." He gave her a blank look. Her voice took on her lecturing tone "Post-traumatic stress disorder is a term for certain physiological consequences of exposure to, or confrontation with, stressful experiences that the person experiences as highly traumatic." She ran a hand through her hair. "We have to help her. For most people the symptoms pass in a few months but if it doesn't... it could become a life-threatening disorder."

"What can we do for her?" he asked.

"For now all we can do is be there for her, take care of her, and be patient." They left the room in silence, each caught up in their own thoughts. They were both pulled back to reality by the loud rumbling of Harry's stomach.

"Hungry are we?" Hermione teased. He blushed.

"I'm a growing boy, I need all the food I can get!"

"Well it *is* lunch time" they were just making it to the second floor. "I'll go get Cattie and we'll meet you downstairs." He caught her elbow.

"That's ok, I'll go get her." She nodded and headed down the stairs. He made his way down the hall and to the door next to his. After knocking lightly he turned the knob and stepped in. As soon as he

was through the door Catherine latched onto his legs. Without hesitation he lifted the shaken child into his arms and went and sat in a chair by the fire. Settling the little girl in his lap he lifted her chin, forcing her sad eyes to meet his.

"What's the matter love?" she shook her head.

"Is this about what Hermione told you?"

She nodded and bit her lip, doubt clouded her features.

"You don't believe in magic?"

She nodded furiously. He peered into her eyes then a small smile drifted onto his face.

"You just don't believe that *you* have any magic."

Another nod.

"Well when I first found out I was a wizard I didn't believe it either. I thought they were crazy, how could I have that kind of power in me? I was small and skinny and I wasn't special. It just wasn't possible!" she nodded again. "But then I went to Hogwarts and I got to learn all about magic, I met some really good friends and I found out that there was something special about me." He looked directly into her eyes. "And there's something special about *you*. You have an amazing gift!" she blushed a bit but he could see she was pleased.

"Now, lets go get some lunch." She nodded and together they left the room and went downstairs.

A few days later Harry once again woke up early. Today was the day he was to meet with Dumbledore. After detangling himself from Hermione he dragged himself out of bed and took a shower. Once he was done he pulled on his outfit. Though he didn't want to admit it he wanted to make an impression on Dumbledore. He was wearing a pair of black trousers, a dark green button-up shirt, and a black blazer. He left the bathroom and before he left the room he wrote a letter to Hermione, explaining where he was going. He hadn't told her anything about Dumbledore's letter, all it would do is worry her.

Before he left he wanted to check on Catherine. He quietly inched open the door, expecting to see her curled up in her bed. Instead he spotted her sitting in one of the huge chairs in front of the fire. She turned in the chair and offered him a small smile.

“Good morning Kitty-Cat” he whispered. Her face lit up at the nickname. “What are you doing up so early?” she lifted up a book that was in her lap.

“What are you reading?” she pointed to the title. ***The Standard Book of Spells, Grade One***. His eyebrows shot up.

“Wow, that’s kind of a difficult book” she shrugged. “Ok, I’m going to be gone for a few hours.”

She pouted. He grinned at her.

“I’ll be back by nightfall, ok?” she looked down and fiddled with the edge of her yellow nightgown. His face softened.

“I promise that I’ll come back.”

She nodded again. He looked around the room, it was a beautiful room but it wasn’t very personal. You couldn’t even tell a child slept there. He looked back at the little girl and her transfigured nightgown and was struck by inspiration. He stood up from his crouch and walked to a desk in the corner, Catherine following him. He pulled out a roll of parchment and a quill then picked up the little girl and placed her in the desk’s chair.

“Can you write down your address for me?” giving him a confused look she nodded and painstakingly wrote down the address. When she was done she handed the parchment to him.

“Thank you, love.” He leaned over and placed a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll see you later.” She waved and he walked out the door.

Four hours later he was roaring down a narrow street in a sleepy neighborhood. Through his helmet he checked the houses for the address Catherine had given him, he was almost to the end of the street when he spotted the house. It was a small two-story blue and

white house. It was surrounded by a white picket fence and droves of blue and white flowers. He pulled into the empty driveway and cut the engine. After swinging off the bike and putting away his helmet he tiptoed around the house and to the back door, checking to make sure that there was no one watching he pulled his wand out of his pocket.

“Alohomora” the door swung open without resistance. He stepped into the house. It was dark and the entire place had a slight musty smell.

“Lumos” a sharp beam of light cut through the gloom. He continued his trek through the silent house. Taking a shaky breath he did what he came to do.

He went into the living room. The walls were littered with photos of Catherine and her mother. He pulled one off of a shelf, it was of Catherine’s mother, a man, and what he guessed was Catherine as a baby. The man had shaggy brown hair and Catherine’s dark blue eyes, he was holding her in his lap and the mother was leaning a head on his shoulder. He put the picture in his bag and proceeded to get more, the rest were all of Catherine and her mother. He wanted her to have something to remind her of her family. After he finished with the pictures he made his way up the stairs, he immediately knew which room was Catherine’s. The entire door was painted pink and her name was written on it in gold. He pushed the door open stepped in. It was freezing, the window was open and everything was completely still. He slowly walked to her pink wardrobe and pulled open the mirrored doors. He grabbed as many outfits and he could and put them in his bag then walked over to a low bookshelf and began taking out books and also putting them in his bag. He went around the room picking up anything he thought she’d want, toys, drawings, books, and a little statue of a unicorn he found on her bedside table. He was placing the figurine in his bag when he spotted a stuffed brown teddy bear leaning against one of the pillows. He lifted the soft bear in his hands, it was a worn looking thing with a frayed and fading pink bow and only one eye. It looked much loved. With a sad smile he shrunk it and put it in his bag.

He took one last glance around the dark cold room and left.

Once he put his bag in the compartment in his bike and put his helmet back on he pulled out of the driveway and roared back down the street.

He still had a few hours left before his meeting with Dumbledore but he wanted to be at Grimmauld place but he wanted to be there early. He wanted to make sure Dumbledore didn't have any of his followers hiding out.

He pulled into an alley about a block from the manor and shrunk his bike. He walked the rest of the way, constantly checking over his shoulder to make sure no one was following him. When he made it to the familiar stretch of land he concentrated. The house instantly appeared. Checking over his shoulder again he opened the door and had to duck when a spell flew over his head. He quickly rolled to the side, his wand drawn.

"What's the password to the marauder's map?" a familiar voice said from above him. Standing directly above him was Remus Lupin.

"I solemnly swear I am up to no good." The man looked at him suspiciously then lowered his wand. A tired grin crossed his face and he extended his hand to Harry. He grabbed his hand and stood up.

"That was quite a welcome!" Harry said. Remus shrugged.

"You can never be too careful" They looked at each other awkwardly for a second before Remus reached out and pulled Harry into his arms.

"It's good to see you Harry." He whispered. Harry had to blink back his tears.

"It's good to see you too, professor" Remus held him at arms length and looked him up and down.

"It's Remus, I'm no longer your professor."

"Ok, Remus"

"Look at you Harry! All grown up" he shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "I like the piercing, nice touch. What are you doing here." Harry's face became hard and Remus raised an eyebrow.

"I can see this is going to be a serious conversation, why don't I make some tea." He followed the man into the dingy kitchen and sat at the table while he made the tea. That were silent while the tea was being made, Remus placed two steaming cups on the table.

"So, what's going on?" Harry took a deep breath then launched into the story. It took three hours for him to tell the man everything and when he finished there was a silence. He could see the anger burning in Remus's usual calm eyes.

"Well that explains a lot." He muttered sipping his tea. Harry snorted. They sat in silence for a while longer.

"Remus?" the man's eyes jerked to him. "I-I want to apologize for the way I acted-" Remus waved his hand dismissively.

"There's no need to apologize Harry, you had every right to be a little angry. Now tell me Harry, what happened after your escape from Tonks and Kingsley?" he told the man all about the attack and Catherine. He was quite shocked when he told him that she was living with him and Hermione. He had just finished his story when the fireplace flared to life. They were both instantly on their feet with wands drawn when Dumbledore stepped out of the fireplace.

"I didn't expect you to be here so early Harry." He said. Harry's jaw clenched and he had to take several deep breaths. He couldn't lose his cool now.

"I do a lot of unexpected things, professor."

"Indeed." Remus cleared his throat and both wizards looked at him.

"I think I'll just go check on Buckbeak." He gave them a nod and a wink in Harry's direction and left the room.

"I think we have a few things to discuss Harry."

A/N: Ducks flying objects I know! I promised that Ron would be in this chapter but it unfortunately ran way to long. The full dicussion will be next chapter but I'm not going to promise anything else! Thank y'all for reading!

Chapter 11

"I think we have a few things to discuss Harry." The old man ignored the snort that Harry's made at that statement and sat at the table.

"Please, take a seat Harry." Keeping his face blank Harry slid into a chair across from Dumbledore. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bag of lemon drops. After offering one to Harry, who denied the offer, he popped one into his mouth. While the man was enjoying his candies Harry noticed that one of the man's hands appeared blackened and burned.

"What happened to your hand, Headmaster?" he inquired. The man slipped the injured hand into the folds of his robes.

"Nothing to worry about" he said. "So, how have you been my boy?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Look Dumbledore, I don't have time for your grandfather act." He raised his eyebrows at Harry's cold tone. "We both know why we're here."

The smile slipped from Dumbledore's face and he folded his hands in his lap.

"You're right. What is it that you want to know?" Harry mentally ran through the list of questions he had wanted to ask trying to figure out where to start.

"You said you knew of The Prophecy all along?" the man nodded. "Why didn't you train me? Prepare me for the battle you *knew* I'd have to fight?" the twinkle faded from his eyes and he slouched in the chair, looking every bit his age.

"I wanted you to have a childhood. I wanted you to grow up without that pressure, I wanted you to be happy." His eyes became sad. "*Oh yeah, I was real damn happy.*"

"Bullshit." Harry said flatly. The old man's eyes snapped to him in surprise. "If you had any interest in me having a childhood or being

“happy” you wouldn’t have stuck me with the Dursley’s. You would have made sure that I was being taken care of. Now, let’s try again. Why didn’t you train me?” Dumbledore seemed thrown by Harry’s attitude. His eyes narrowed.

“Mr. Potter, I am your Headmaster. You *will* treat me with respect.”

“Respect is something to be earned” His voice was cold and his eyes were burning with fury “It’s not something that comes with a title *Headmaster*.” The temperature in the room seemed to have dropped.

“What exactly is it that you want Harry?”

“I want the truth.” There was a silence. Dumbledore took a deep breath and looked back at the boy, no man in front of him.

“It wasn’t a top priority to train you.” He began. “I thought it would take many years until Voldemort could become strong enough to even be able to *attempt* to harm you and there were more important things that needed to be dealt with.”

“More important things to be dealt with?! If you knew that there was even a chance for him to return and you knew that I was the one “destined” to destroy him why didn’t you make sure that I’d be prepared! What could possibly be more important than preparing me for the task ahead?!”

“We needed to find the deatheaters that were left after Voldemort was destroyed.”

“You’re right, that is so much more important than training the future savior of the wizarding world.” His voice was dripping with sarcasm. His eyes narrowed. Something about Dumbledore’s explanation didn’t make sense. Even if he thought he needed to find the deatheaters he still would have needed to give him *some* kind of training. Unless....

“There’s more to this isn’t there? You know exactly how I’m supposed to destroy Voldemort don’t you?” the old man stared into his eyes, he felt a slight prod in his mind, that old man was trying to use Legilimency on him! His shields flew up, successfully pushing the old

man out of his mind. Dumbledore's face showed shock and his eyes were wide.

"Well" he cleared his throat and forced a smile on his face. "I see you've been practicing your Occumency." He gritted his teeth, he was absolutely seething.

"Stay. Out. Of. My. Mind" one of the tea cups on the table exploded. He forced himself to take calm breaths, to calm the raging inferno of anger in his chest.

"I'm sorry Harry but I need to know where you've been. Your disappearance has had the entire wizarding world in an uproar."

"And?"

"You have to realize Harry that you mean a lot to a lot of people"

"Yeah, I felt the love all last year when they were calling me a raving, attention seeking, lunatic." Dumbledore gave another worn sigh. "Now tell me. How am I supposed to defeat him?" Dumbledore raised his wand and waved in a complicated pattern.

"Just a little privacy charm." The older wizard said. He sat up straighter in his chair and clasped his fingers in front of him, his eyes became serious.

"When Tom was in his sixth year he began to make Horcruxes. A Horcrux is a magical object created through the use of the Dark Arts by evil witches or wizards who wish to avoid death. To do so, they conceal part of their soul within an object — the Horcrux — that is usually hidden away in a safe location. Thus protected, they become immune to death while it exists. Even if their bodies are destroyed, part of their soul remains earth-bound and undamaged. However, the destruction of the creators' bodies leaves them in a state of half-life, "lesser than the meanest ghost". Lord Voldemort was left in this state when he attempted to kill you when you were a baby and it backfired." He leaned forward with a grave expression on his face. "Creating a Horcrux requires an evil and violent act: the murder of an individual, which is the supreme act of evil that rips the soul apart. The soul of the creator is split, and a spell is cast to infuse one

portion of the soul into the intended object, which becomes a Horcrux. This magic is called the most evil and unnatural of the Dark Arts.”

“Wait, you’re saying the Voldermort created a Horcrux? To gain immortality?”

“Not just one, several. It is likely that Voldemort created six Horcruxes from six of his “important murders” and kept the remaining portion of his soul within his body, thus keeping his soul in seven separate locations. Voldemort chose to do so as seven is a powerful, mystical number. Thus, anyone wishing to completely kill Voldemort must first locate and destroy all of his Horcruxes, before attempting to destroy the remainder of his soul that resides in his body.”

“Hold on a second! Your saying that I have to find all of Voldermort’s Horcruxes and destroy them before I can destroy him?”

“Precisely” Harry was in shock. How the *hell* was he supposed to find all of the Horcruxes and destroy them?! He didn’t even know what he was looking for!

“Only five need to be destroyed.” Harry’s eyebrows shot up.

“What happened to the other two?”

“The first was a ring once owned by Tom’s grandfather Marvolo Gaunt. I found it hidden in the Gaunt Shack. Tom took the ring after he framed his uncle Morfin Gaunt, he wore it to Hogwarts. It was during the destruction of the ring that I was injured by a terrible curse but all is well now! The second was actually Tom Riddle’s diary.” A smile came upon Dumbledore’s face and his eye began to twinkle.” Luckily you have already destroyed it.” Feeling bewildered Harry ran a hand through his hair.

“Ok, do you know what the remaining Horcruxes are?”

“I can give an educated guess. I believe that Tom is using relicts from the founders.” He popped another candy into his mouth. “I think that the first could be Salazar Slytherin’s missing locket. It seems that he stole it from Hepzibah Smith. The next is a cup once belonging to Helga Hufflepuff that he also stole from Hepzibah smith. The things

that are from Godric and Rowena I have yet to find, the only surviving relics of Gryffindor are his sword and the sorting hat which are both in safe keeping at Hogwarts. The final one I believe was to be made from your murder, the most important, but as he failed the murder of Frank Bryce was used to make the final Horcrux and Nagini is the vessel, based on her behavior and the control that Tom exerts over her. She underlines the Slytherin connection." Harry rubbed his head trying to absorb all the information Dumbledore had just flung at him. How was he supposed to find all of these?

"Do you have any idea where any of these items are?" he asked.

"I have a vague idea of where the locket is and Nagini is surely wherever Voldemort is but as for the other items..." He shrugged.

"Where is the place where you think the locket is?"

"I don't think it's the time or place to give out that information." Harry's eye narrowed.

"So you expect me to just sit around while you go about finding the Horcruxes? Shouldn't I know what exactly it is that I'm up against?"

"Harry, it would not be beneficial for me to tell you where it is. I can't let you go rushing out to destroy it by yourself, you could get yourself captured or killed." He said firmly. He wasn't going to tell him anything more. He dropped the subject, he'd find it out by himself. They sat in silence for a few minutes each caught up in their own thoughts.

"Is that all you needed to know Harry?" Harry sat straighter in his chair and glared at the man across from him.

"No. Why didn't the Order or The Ministry do anything after the Granger's were attacked? Why did you do nothing while the muggle police put Hermione in a home?! Why did no one come for her?!" Dumbledore shifted slightly in his chair.

"The death of Ms. Granger's family was a tragedy and I am deeply saddened by it." He paused "But at the same time of the attack on the Grangers a good number of the Order members were watching you. We simply didn't have anyone to spare." He peered over his half

moon spectacles at him, his eyes looking disappointed *"You'd think by now he'd know he can't guilt me like that anymore."*

"Well that was pretty damn stupid of you wasn't it Dumbledore? Why would you put every single one of your minions on my tail and if that's all it was why didn't anyone go to check on her after? How is it that she had to wait for five hours before the muggles came and then no one bothered to check on her for a week?"

"We didn't have the time, there is a lot more that we need to do than just protect your friends." He stared into the older man's face then his eyes narrowed.

"You forgot about her." When Dumbledore's eyes strayed from his he knew he was right. "I can't believe you fucking forgot her!"

"I did not forget her. I didn't hear about the attack until a few days later and there wasn't anywhere for us to take her. She was safe."

"There wasn't anywhere to take her? What about the Weasley's? That would have taken her in."

"The Weasley's didn't know about the attack either and when they were told Ms.Granger had already disappeared."

"So they knew nothing of it?"

"No." he filed that information away for later.

"You said that a deatheater heard the first part of the prophesy, who was it?" Dumbledore gave him a surprised look.

"That is classified information Harry and I don't think that it's anything you need to know." Harry leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow.

"I think its for me to decide what I need and have the right to know." Dumbledore stood up out of his chair.

"Ok Harry, I think this has gone on long enough." He pulled a stack of letters out of one of his many pockets and placed it on the table. "I

have entertained your little play on power but now this has to stop. You need to go back to the Dursley's where you are protected. Here are the O.W.L results for you and Ms.Granger and your booklists." Harry stood up also, a sneer on his face.

"Has it? I think that I'm just getting started. And you need to remember Dumbledore, you are not my guardian. You cannot force me to do anything, I will *not* be going back to the Dursley's. Not now, now ever." Dumbledore sighed and pulled his wand out of the fold of his robes.

"Harry, I'm very sorry for this but I cannot let you disappear again. I can't risk you getting captured by Voldemort." He pointed his wand at Harry.

"**Stupefy**" Harry hurriedly flicked his wand. The table flew up and in front of Harry, the spell hit it and it exploded.

"Well that was kinda sneaky Headmaster." Before the man could send out another spell he sprinted out of the kitchen. Another spell hit the wall where his head had been seconds before.

"FILTHY MUDBLOODS!! HALF-BREEDS! DEFILING MY HOME WITH YOUR FILTH!" Mrs. Black's portrait was awoken by the crashes. She was abruptly cut off and he could hear someone thundering down the stairs.

"Harry! What happened?!" Remus shouted. Before he could respond a spell hit the couch he'd been standing behind and it slid backwards and pinned him against the wall. Remus sprinted down the rest of the stairs and came to stand next to him. He grabbed the arm of the couch to pull it off Harry when Dumbledore stepped into the room.

"Hold on Remus." Remus's head snapped towards the wizard and looked at him in shock.

"What are you doing?!"

"Mr. Potter needs to go back to the Dursley's, it is the one place where Voldemort can't touch him." He stepped closer and raised his

wand. Harry tried to speak but the heavy piece of furniture was crushing him and cutting off his air.

"You can't force him to live with those *people!*" Dumbledore's eyes became hard.

"I will do what is necessary to keep him safe." Remus once again grabbed the arm of the couch and with all his strength pulled it off of Harry. As soon as he was free Harry lifted his wand.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" an armchair in front of the fireplace flew into the air and towards Dumbledore. The ancient wizard erected a shield and the chair broke on impact.

"Harry, say that he isn't welcome here!" Remus shouted.

"What?!" Dumbledore took down his shield.

"Just do it!"

"Albus Dumbledore you are not welcome here!" The house shuddered and the front door swung open. A stunned look crossed the old man's face. He was suddenly knocked off his feet and thrown out of the door. As soon as he was out it closed and everything went silent.

"What the hell was that?!" Harry asked.

"Well since you are now the owner of this house you can decide who can and cannot enter or who isn't allowed. When you said that he was no longer welcome here the house got rid of him, He will never be able to set foot in here again." Remus gave him a tired grin. "So much for Order meetings." Harry grinned.

"Damn, that's heartbreaking." With a hand on his chest he began to make his way back to the kitchen, Remus reached over and grabbed his elbow.

"Hold on Harry, let me look at that." He gently lifted up the edge of Harry's shirt and pulled out his wand.

“**Medicor**” the sharp pain faded from his chest and he let out a breath.

“Thanks Remus.”

“Your welcome, cub.”

“Cub?” Remus gave him a fond smile.

“That’s what we used to call you, when you were a baby. I can call you something else if you like though.”

“No! I-I like it.” The man smiled at him again and clapped his shoulder. They went back into the kitchen and Remus repaired the table.

“So, what are your plans?” he asked as he picked a chair up off the floor. Harry shrugged and after getting his own chair plopped down across from the man. The stack of letters from Dumbledore was by his feet. With a sigh he picked them up and placed them on the table.

“I don’t know.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve been teaching myself as many defensive spells as I can but I know I wouldn’t stand a chance against Voldermort. I’d barely get out of a fight with Lucius Malfoy!”

“I heard you did pretty well during the attack last week.” Harry snorted.

“I got lucky and stunned a few of them. I can’t just stun them anymore Remus!” he leaned forward and stared directly into the werewolf’s eyes. “I have to know how to shoot to kill. If I hadn’t...If I hadn’t killed those deatheaters in the stairwell they would’ve killed Hermione and Catherine.” His voice was anguished “I *cannot* let more people die because I was too afraid to do what is necessary.” The older man sighed and ran a hand over his face.

“I understand what you’re saying Harry and I agree. Nothing comes of just stunning deatheaters, they’ll just be revived and more people will get hurt. It’s something the Order fails to see,” He clasped his hands in front of him and looked back at Harry with determination in his eyes. “I want to help you Harry.” Harry looked at the worn man, at the strength and determination he saw in him, at the love he saw when he looked at him. He swallowed thickly. “*He really cares about me.*”

“Thank you Remus.” He whispered brokenly. Remus’s face softened.

“No problem cub. You are part of my family. My pack.” He felt the tears rush to his eyes and he quickly looked down at his hands. A hand rested on his neck and he looked back up at the man whose eyes also had a teary glaze to them. He smiled at him and Remus smiled back. With one last pat on Harry’s neck he drew back.

“Would you train me Remus?” the werewolf smiled.

“Of course Harry.” He grinned, he didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of asking Remus before.

They talked for another hour, trying to come up some sort of lesson plan. They had decided that they would first go over the things that he had already learned and find where or if he needed to improve. They then would start with learning to use simple everyday charms and spells to defend oneself and then advanced spells. Remus had conjured a roll of parchment and was writing it all down.

“Ok, how do you want to schedule this?” Remus chewed on the end of his quill while he thought about it.

“I can come around at about...5pm?” Harry nodded, taking a sip out of the fresh tea Remus had conjured. “Where exactly is it that I’ll be meeting you?” Harry bit his lip and glanced quickly around the room.

“Where’s Kreacher?” a smirk appeared on the older man’s face and he took a sip of his tea.

“It was quite a tragedy. He was cleaning upstairs when I accidentally knocked him into Buckbeak’s room and closed the door. I didn’t notice until a couple of days later, when I went to check on him...well lets say it wasn’t a pretty picture.” Harry burst into laughter. He nearly fell off his chair.

“Accident.” He said between his chuckles. “I’m sure it was.” Once his laughter died down he reached across the table and picked up a spare piece of parchment. With the man peering over his shoulder he wrote down the address to the Potter Cottage. His eyebrows raised high when he saw what Harry was writing.

“Good place to hide.” He said.

“I thought so.” He handed the slip of parchment to Remus. “To floo make sure you say the entire address or you won’t be able to get in.” the werewolf nodded and slipped the paper into a pocket of his worn brown robes. Harry checked his watch and winced, it was already nearly five. There was no way he was getting back home before nightfall. Catching his action Remus spoke.

“I guess you need to be going soon?” he asked.

“Yes, I need to be home soon.” His mind flashed to Catherine. He promised her he’d be home before it got dark. He and Remus stood up from their chairs and Harry looked closely at the man across from him. He looked worn out and tired. He winced when he remembered that the full moon had just passed. He frowned slightly when he realized something.

“Hey Remus?” the man raised a questioning eyebrow. “Where are you staying?” the older man looked around the dingy room and shrugged.

“I’ve been staying here for the past few months but now that they’ll probably be no Order here...” he shrugged again. Harry looked and the old dark house then smiled suddenly at Remus.

“Who cares if there isn’t an Order, you can stay here.” Remus shook his head vigorously.

“No, this is your house Harry.”

“Not anymore. I want you to have it.” Shock showed on the man’s face.

“Harry, S-Sirius left you this house. He wanted *you* to have it!”

“He’d want you to have somewhere to live, he’d want you to stay here! And plus I have a home Remus, this house would just rot away anyway.” The man sighed again and took another glance around the room.

“Are you sure about this Harry?”

“Of course I am!” another fond smile graced Remus’s face. He walked around the table and pulled Harry into his arms.

“Thank you cub.” Harry shrugged again, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“It’s not a problem.” The man released him. “Now, what do I do to make it officially yours?”

“Well its kind of like what you did to Dumbledore.” He spoke quickly once he saw the anger cross Harry’s face at the name. “You just say ‘I, Harry James Potter, relinquish my right to 12 Grimmauld Place and put it in hands of Remus Tristan Lupin.’”

“I, Harry Potter, relinquish my right to 12 Grimmauld Place and put it in the hands of Remus Tristan Lupin.” He felt a tingle of magic run down his spine. The house once again shuddered and a small flash of blue light surrounded Remus. In an instant it disappeared and everything went back to normal.

“Wow.” Harry breathed.

“Wow indeed.” They proceeded to walk to the front door. Before he left Remus pulled him into his arms.

“Bye cub, I’ll see you tomorrow. Be safe.”

“I’ll try, see you later Moony.” Giving his one last pat on the back Remus let him go. He handed the stack of letters to Harry.

“I almost forgot, you left these on the table.” Giving the letters a wary look he took them and put them in his bag.

“Thanks.”

“Your welcome.” After saying goodbye again he left.

It was dark out when he finally made it back to the cottage, nearly 8pm. He rolled down the driveway and parked next to the steps. Once he pulled his bag out of the compartment he started up the

stairs. Before he turned the knob he looked up he saw the curtains to the windows next to the doors move and then the door swung open. Before he could see who stood in the doorway a weight hit him in the stomach. He looked down to see a mess of wet honey blonde hair. With a small smile he lifted the little girl into his arms and went into the house.

"Hey Kitty-Cat" the little girl lifted her teary face from his shoulder and offered him a watery smile. "I'm sorry, I know I promised to be back before it got dark. Did I worry you?" she nodded. "I'm sorry love." She buried her head back into the nape of his neck. He could feel her little body shaking. He heard a throat clear in front of them, he looked up from the child in his arms and at Hermione. She was standing on the bottom of the steps in her blue silk pajamas, her hair pulled back into a thick braid. Her lips were pressed tightly together and her hands were on her hips. He smiled sheepishly.

"Hey 'Mi." she walked closer to him and threw her arms around his neck, Catherine let out a small noise as she was squeezed between the two of them. Hermione quickly released him and smacked him on the back of the head.

"Where were you?! I woke up this morning and you were nowhere to be found! You were gone for hours!" she scolded.

"I left a note." Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Oh yes! The note" she reached into a pocket of her pajamas and pulled out the letter.

"Dear Hermione,

I have a meeting with Dumbledore, I'll be back in a few hours.

-Harry" she glared at him.

"I'm sorry 'Mi" he pouted and looked down slightly. She melted instantly and a small smile appeared on her face.

"Well you did leave a note." She rolled her eyes. "What was it that you had to talk to him about?" he glanced at the little girl in his arms.

"I'll tell you later." She nodded and reached her arms out to Catherine who instantly went to her.

"Ok, I told you could stay up until Harry got back now its time for bed." The little girl frowned and turned her big blue eyes to Harry, her expression pleading.

"It wouldn't hurt to let her stay up a little bit longer." Hermione gave him a stern look.

"No, its 8 o'clock. She should have been in bed by seven." He looked back at the child and shrugged.

"Hermione's right. If you go on to bed right now I'll give you a surprise tomorrow." She stared at him suspiciously for a minute then nodded. Hermione shook her head and they all went up the stairs.

After Harry gave the little girl a goodnight kiss Hermione went to tuck her in, while she was doing this Harry went back to their room and threw his bag on the bed. He quickly grabbed a thin t-shirt and a pair of black pajama bottoms and went to take a shower.

When he stepped out of the steamy bathroom Hermione was sitting crossed legged on the bed sorting through his bag.

"Why are you going through my things?" she barely spared him a glance.

"Who is this for?" she asked picking up the little brown teddy bear. He dropped next to her.

"Catherine. I stopped by her old house this morning, I wanted her to have a few of her things." She smiled at him. He looked away and tried to ignore the annoying fluttering in his stomach. He didn't notice the slight look of hurt on Hermione's face.

"Is this the surprise you were talking about?" he turned back to her.

"It's a part of it, I wanted to fix up her room. You know, make it more personal." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"That's sweet of you Harry." He shrugged, flushing slightly. Hermione's head lifted from his shoulder and he barely kept himself from sighing in relief. "When are we doing it?"

"We?"

"Of course" she said indignantly "I want her to feel at home here."

"I was thinking of doing it while she's in the library, you know how she is when she's in there. Just like you" she punched him in the arm and he threw himself backwards on the bed as if he was in pain. He sat back up and grinned at the giggling girl. He loved it when she laughed.

"Ok, we'll do it tomorrow while she's distracted." She put the bear back in the bag and turned toward him.

"Now, tell me what happened with Dumbledore." Harry took a deep breath and launched into his tale. By the time he was finished Hermione was seething.

"How could he-how could he try to stun you?!" she said furiously. "That man has had too much power for way to long." She dropped her face into her hands and took several deep breaths. She was calmer when she looked back at Harry.

"So you say Voldemort has made Horcruxes?" he sighed and leaned against the headboard.

"Yes. Dumbledore thinks that there are five left including the soul fragment Voldemort still hold in his body." She leaned next to him.

"He didn't give you *any* idea on where they could be?" he snorted.

"He said he had a "vague idea" on where the locket is but he refused to tell me anything."

"But he's destroyed the ring?"

"Yeah. Injured himself pretty bad doing it to."

"Did he say where he found it?"

“He said he found it hidden in an old shack where Voldermort’s grandfather used to live.” She sat up suddenly, startling him.

“And the diary was also a Horcrux?!”

“Err...yeah.” She turned to him with a grin on her face and her eyes alight with excitement.

“I don’t think he meant to but Dumbledore has given you a huge clue!” seeing his blank expression she gave an exasperated sigh.

“Voldermort is hiding things in places that that connect with his childhood! His old diary was hidden at Hogwarts-”

“Technically it wasn’t hidden at Hogwarts, Lucius Malfoy had it.” She sighed and waved a dismissive hand.

“But he more than likely had it kept there. Then the ring was kept in the old house where his grandfather *and* mother lived! I bet wherever the rest of the Horcruxes are they’re all in places that are somehow connected to his childhood.”

“So if we researched his childhood...”

“We’d find the Horcruxes!” she finished.

“It can’t be that simple!”

“Of course its not that simple Harry but it’s a start.” He nodded. Hermione picked his bag back up and pulled out the stack of letters.

“I saw these earlier.” Her face took on a sad smile. “You want to see what our O.W.L results are?” he shrugged. He didn’t expect that he did that good.

“Sure, why not?” he took the letter Hermione handed to him and with a deep breath tore open the familiar seal.

Dear Mr. Potter,

Enclosed you will find the results of your Ordinary Wizinging Level tests. Each grade is the average of both the theoretical

and practical parts of each exam. In those that only contain a theoretical portion, your grade will be the one given.

The marks used to evaluate your scores are: Outstanding, Exceeds Expectations, Acceptable, Poor, and Dreadful. The last passing grade is Acceptable.

Your results are found in the attached parchment.

Professor Janice Klein

Wizarding Examination Authority

Ordinary Wizard Level results for Harry James Potter.

Astronomy

Theory: Acceptable

Practical: Poor

Mark: Poor

O.W.L. Received: No

Care of Magical Creatures

Theory: Exceeds Expectations

Practical: Outstanding

Mark: Exceeds Expectations

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Charms

Theory: Exceeds Expectations

Practical: Exceeds Expectations

Grade: Exceeds Expectations

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Defense against the Dark Arts

Theory: Outstanding

Practical: Outstanding

Grade: Outstanding

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Divination

Theory: Acceptable

Practical: Dreadful

Grade: Acceptable

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Herbology

Theory: Acceptable

Practical: Exceeds Expectations

Grade: Exceeds Expectations

O.W.L. Received: Yes

History of Magic

Theory: Poor

Practical: NA

Grade: Poor

O.W.L. Received: No

Potions

Theory: Exceeds Expectations

Practical: Exceeds Expectations

Grade: Exceeds Expectations

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Transfiguration

Theory: Exceeds Expectations

Practical: Exceeds Expectations

Grade: Exceeds Expectations

O.W.L. Received: Yes

Total O.W.L.'s Received: 7

In slight shock he slowly lowered the parchment in his hands and stared, wide eyed at the girl across from him.

"Well?" she asked. Wordlessly he handed his results to her. A few seconds later she let out a shriek and threw her arms around the still stunned Harry.

"Seven owls!" she exclaimed "That's great Harry!" he nodded. She took another glance at the parchment and the smile slipped off of her face.

"Oh no! You won't be able to be an Auror." He shrugged again.

"It doesn't matter. I don't think I really want to be one, the last place I want to be is working for the ministry." She nodded.

"I understand." She picked up her results and stared down at them.

"Well? Aren't you going to open it?" with shaking hands she carefully opened the letter. He sat anxiously, watching her face for some sign

of what the results were but his face remained blank. After waiting for another minute he reached over and poked her. She jumped and a huge grin crossed her face.

"Nine! I got nine owls." She once again threw her arms around Harry, nearly cutting off his air.

"Congratulations 'Mi! I'm proud of you." He whispered in her ear. She sat back and looked into his face then leaned forward slightly and kissed his cheek.

"Thank you." She quickly released him, a blush coloring her cheeks. A slightly awkward silence fell over them. Harry cleared his throat, breaking the silence and picked up the last two letters.

"These are our book lists." He placed them between them. He hadn't thought about Hogwarts in a while. The thought of going back had never even crossed his mind. What would he be going back to? The one place where Dumbledore can keep an eye on him at all times, where he was forced to learn all that useless shit. Hogwarts is the worst place for him, the most dangerous place. And he couldn't leave Catherine, not now not ever but then there was Hermione...he couldn't ask her to stay with him but he couldn't live without her! She'd want to go to school and he couldn't make her put her life on hold for him.

"We can't go back." He was ripped out of his thoughts by the small voice next to him. He turned and looked into her teary face. "Not after all that's happened. I don't think I could go back there and pretend that everything's alright." Her voice broke at the end of her sentence. "I don't think I could go back there and sit through class, and go to quidditch games, or sit in the great hall and ignore the fact that a war is going on just beyond the walls. I can't do that anymore."

"You're right, we can't go back." Said Harry "Hogwarts is no longer a safe place and we can't pretend that it is. Now that I know how I'm supposed to defeat Voldemort I need to get ready. I need to end this." He felt Hermione slip her hand into his. She looked into his eyes, her own full of tears, and gave him a determined nod.

"We can do this." He reached over and pulled her closer to him. She laid her head on his shoulder. After a while they laid down and went to sleep.

It was mid afternoon the next day. Harry and Hermione were standing in the middle of Catherine's room, their wands at the ready and a book in one of Hermione's hands.

"Can't we just do it already?!" Harry asked.

"No! We have to do it right, just let me find the correct spell." They had been standing there for the past ten minutes while Hermione tried to find the spell to paint the walls.

"Found it!" she pointed to the spell on the page. Harry began on the far wall while Hermione went to the other.

"Fuco Light Blue." The paint flew from their wands and hit the walls, it spread over them in an even coat. Hermione grinned.

It took them two hours to fully change the room around. When they were done they stepped back and surveyed their work. The walls were painted in a soft blue and a band of gold surrounded the room. The floors were done in a light wood with a large circular fluffy white rug in the middle. The bed had soft white sheets and a blue comforter with little gold flowers embroidered on it, there were also large white and blue pillows. Harry had leaned Catherine's bear pillows. One wall was lined with light wood bookcases which they had filled with all her books and some of Hermione's favorites. Her lightwood wardrobe was full of all her clothes and a lightwood toy box carved with flowers held her toys. They had put the ones that Harry had retrieved from her house in it along with some others that they had transfigured. Harry had put the pictures of her family and the little figurine on the mantle of her fireplace and instead of the chairs that sat in front of the fireplace they had put two large blue pillows. Hermione had even put a large painting of a horse on one wall, it frolicked around in a field of flowers. Before they left Harry placed a small crystal dragon on her nightstand.

"You think she'll like it?" Harry asked.

“She’ll love it!” She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the hallway. “I can’t wait for her to see it!”

“Hold on a sec.” he turned back to the closed door. He waved his wand and a gold nameplate appeared on it. **Catherine.**

“Nice touch.”

“Thanks.” They continued down the hallway and to the huge double-doors of the library. They found the little girl on the second floor curled up in one of the huge cushy chairs with a book on Herbology in her hands. She looked up when they came to stand in front of her.

“Do you remember that surprise I told you about last night?” Harry asked. She nodded happily and put her book on the table next to her. “You ready to go see it?” she jumped out of the chair and grabbed Hermione’s hand and began to pull her down the stairs.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He followed the two girls down the stairs and into the hallway. Catherine’s eyes got wide when she saw her name on the door and she looked up at him curiously. He reached down and lifted her up.

“Close your eyes.” She quickly complied. He opened the door and stepped through, Hermione behind them. When they were inside he placed the little girl in the middle of the room and stepped back to stand next to Hermione.

“Ok, open your eyes.” Her eyes flew open and she gasped. She looked around the room in wonder, her eyes wide. When she spotted her bear on the bed she ran over and held it in her arms. Tears were now running down her cheeks. She walked over to the mantel and reverently ran her fingers over the picture of her parents. She walked back to them and wrapped her arms around both their legs, her little body shaking with sobs. Hermione knelt down and pulled the little girl into her arms, Harry crouched down next to them and rubbed her back.

“Th-Thank you.” The child rasped. His eyes met Hermione’s in shock. This was the first time Catherine had spoken since the attack.

"It's no problem Cattie" Hermione whispered. "This is your home." She lifted her head from Hermione's shoulder and peered at the both of them then she nodded. After giving her another squeeze Hermione let her go.

"Now, don't you want to look around some more?" the child nodded again then went over to her wardrobe. She hesitantly opened it and a huge smile came onto her face when she saw her clothes. After that she raced around the room, rubbing her feet on the soft carpet, going through her toy box, pulling out every single book then putting them away. She seemed to especially love the comforter and the painting of the horse. With a slightly confused expression on her face she picked up the dragon. Harry walked over to her and crouched in front of her.

"I made this for you, if you ever need us all you have to do is press his nose and we'll come." He said softly. She nodded again and hugged his neck.

"Now, lets go get some dinner!" He swung her over his shoulder causing her to burst into shrieks of laughter. Hermione stood in front of them and aimed her wand at Harry.

"Unhand her foul beast!" Harry growled and lunged at her. She shrieked and ran out the door, Harry chasing after her with Catherine giggling over his shoulder. Harry chased Hermione into the dining room and put the little girl on the table. She watched giggling while Harry chased Hermione around the room.

"Stay away from me you evil monster!" Hermione shouted through her laughter. Harry growled again and launched over the table, grabbed her around the waist and tickled her sides. She was laughing so hard tears were streaming down her face. The sound of someone clearing their throat from the doorway interrupted their antics. Harry quickly stopped tickling the breathless girl and turned towards the door. Remus was leaning against the frame with a smirk on his face.

"Professor!" she exclaimed. Harry checked his watch. It was already after 5!

"I lost track of time" he released Hermione. "Hey Remus." The man stepped into the room.

"That's alright, I'm a bit late anyway." He pulled Harry into a short hug then turned to Hermione.

"Hello Hermione, I'm glad to see you're alright." Hermione tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Yeah, thanks to Harry." Remus smiled again then spotted the little girl hiding behind Harry's legs.

"You must be Catherine." She blushed and buried her face in Harry's side.

"Cattie?" she looked up at Harry. "This is Moony." She looked back at the man and waved.

"Hi, nice to meet you Cattie. Do you mind if I call you Cattie?" she stepped back from behind Harry and nodded, giving Remus a shy smile.

"Would you like to join us for dinner?" Hermione asked. Remus shrugged.

"If I'm not imposing, sure."

"Of course you aren't! Now sit down so we can eat." Harry admonished. He picked Catherine up and placed her in the chair next to his. Once everyone was sitting white plates appeared in front of them and a platter of steaming roasted chicken and sautéed vegetables materialized on the middle of the table. Hermione began piling vegetables on Catherine's plate, who wrinkled her nose.

"You have to at least *try* them Cattie" she told the child. Catherine gave her a disgusted look then turned her eyes to Harry.

"Oh no, don't try that with me. Hermione is right, it doesn't hurt to try new things." The little girl pouted and speared a carrot and popped in her mouth. Hermione gave her a pleased smile then placed a slice of chicken on her plate.

Remus watched them with a smile on his face.

“So Remus, are we getting started right after dinner?” Harry asked as he poured Catherine some pumpkin juice. She wrinkled her nose again. She had refused to even taste it once he told her what it was.

“You know you want to try it.” He said. “It’s *really* good.” She continued to look at him in disbelief. “If you taste *just a little bit* I’ll show you the third floor.” She grinned and she took a sip of the juice. As soon as she tasted the juice her eyes lit up and she gulped it down.

She hadn’t been up to the third floor, they had been worried about her going into the dueling room. She’d been curious on where he’d been going every morning. She hadn’t seen the conservatory yet and he knew she’d love it.

“See. I told you you’d love it.” He said smugly. She rolled her eyes and speared another carrot.

“So professor, what are you and Harry going to be starting on?” Hermione asked. Remus took a sip of his pumpkin juice.

“Please, call me Remus. I was thinking we’d work on the possible uses of the *Incendio* spell.”

“Ok, Remus. You’re talking about in combat?”

“Of course.” His amber eye lit with excitement. “Picture this: You’re surrounded by deatheaters, they all have their wands on you, and there’s nowhere to run. What do you do? Send out a stunner? You can’t, you couldn’t stun them all! If you do a simple *Incendio* and quickly turn in a full circle you can set their robes on fire. Instant distraction!” They spent the rest of dinner talking about the various spells that could be used in combat. They were pulled out of their conversation when Catherine let out a huge yawn. Hermione checked the watch on her wrist.

“It’s 7:15! Come on Cattie, time for bed.” The little girl didn’t even protest. Harry gave the half-asleep child a kiss on the forehead and Hermione took her up stairs.

"I see you and Hermione are getting on well." Remus said once the two girls had disappeared up the stairs. Harry blushed and looked away.

"Of course we are, we're best friends." He muttered.

"Sure you are. Now show me to your dueling room." Still slightly flushed Harry led the older man up the stairs and to the third floor. After saying hello to Bronson and Caterina he pushed open the cool stone door and led Remus inside. The man let out a low whistle when he surveyed the large room. With a nod he quickly disregarded his worn gray robes and tossed them in a corner. He turned to Harry with his khaki pants and brown button-up shirt.

"Let's get started." He pointed his wand at one of the mats and transfigured it into a life-sized dummy. "We'll use this to practice with. I want you to try your *Incendio*." Harry nodded and aimed his wand at the dummy.

"***Incendio!***" the dummy burst into flames. They jumped back and Remus quickly put the fire out.

"Whoops." Harry said sheepishly.

"I guess we can say that it's very powerful." They spent the rest of the night going over how to control the power one puts in their spells. Apparently he sometimes used too much. It was going to take a long time for him to fully control his magic but Remus was confident that once he understood it that he'd be more powerful than they had even imagined.

It was nearly 3am when Remus finally left. They scheduled the next meeting for the same time the day after next. There was to be an Order meeting at Hogwarts and Remus needed to attend.

The house was silent when he made his way upstairs; Remus had to go through the fireplace in the family room as it was the only one connected to the floo network. Before he went into the room he and Hermione shared he inched open Catherine's bedroom door. She was curled up on the bed, her covers kicked off, her worn teddy bear clutched in her arms, and a small content smile on her face. After

tucking her covers back around her and giving her another kiss on the forehead he went to his room. He couldn't help but chuckle at the sight that greeted him.

Hermione was asleep sprawled in one of the large chairs in front of the fire. Huge dusty books surrounded her and another large tome sat on her lap. Softly, he walked over to the sleeping girl and picked the book up off her lap. ***Great Wizarding Families by Hollice Malfoy***. With a raised brow he placed it on the table.

He gently slipped his arms under her knees and lifted her out of the chair. She automatically snuggled closer to him. He carried the slumbering girl to the bed and tucked her under the blankets.

He looked down into her peaceful face and brushed a stray curl away from her closed eyes; he leaned over and placed a tender kiss on her brow. It hurt him to be around her. To see her smile, hear her voice, have her sleeping next to him and not be able to touch her. To hold her close to him. To kiss her. He knew that she was confused about the way he'd been treating her lately, he'd been trying to keep her at arms distance. To not let himself get too close to her. *"I don't know how much more of this I can take."* He thought. With a sigh he stepped away from the girl and went to take a shower. He forced himself not to pull her closer to him when he slipped into bed next to her. He stayed up for hours more just watching her sleep but after a while her deep breaths soothed him to sleep.

Something was poking him. He reached up and swatted it away, annoyed that it dared disturb his sleep. A small giggle reached his ears and he cracked his tired eyes open. His eyes immediately met a pair of deep blue orbs.

Catherine was sitting crossed legged on the bed staring down at him in excitement. He checked the clock against the wall. It was 6 o'clock in the morning!

"Kitty-Cat" he groaned "Why are you waking me up so *early*?" she giggled again. Hermione appeared in his line of vision.

“You promised to show her the third floor.” She said smirking at him. He groaned again and forced himself to sit up. The little girl clapped her hands happily and jumped off the bed.

“Do you really need to see it *now*?” she nodded happily. He dragged himself out of bed and grabbed a gray shirt and a pair of dark jeans. When he stepped out of the bathroom (now more awake) Catherine was waiting in a pair of blue jean shorts and a pink t-shirt with Hermione who was also wearing shorts and a dark blue shirt. He forced himself to keep from staring at her legs, how had he not noticed how long they were?

Catherine happily dragged them up the spiraling staircase and to the third floor.

“Why hello there!” Bronson greeted the child. She stared up at the portraits in shock.

“Isn’t she just the sweetest thing?!” Caterina said from her frame. Catherine colored slightly and gave them both a little wave.

“This is Catherine, she’s living here with us.” They welcomed the little girl and after they bid farewell to the portraits they took her to the conservatory. They skipped the potions and dueling room.

She squealed with excitement when she saw the pool and waterfall and she turned her wide eyes to Hermione with a pleading expression on her face.

“You want to go swimming?” she asked. She nodded. “Can you swim?” she rolled her eyes and nodded again and Hermione took her hand.

“I think I saw a swimming suit in her clothes. You want to go put yours on while we get dressed?” Harry shook his head.

“No, I’m not much of a swimmer.” Giving him a dubious glance Hermione took the little girl back downstairs. While they were gone Harry went down the glass stairs and plopped himself down on one of the many lounge chairs next to the pool. He rolled up his pants legs and let his feet dangle into the cool water. About twenty minutes later

he heard the girls coming down the stairs. He turned and looked at them and had to remind himself to keep breathing.

Hermione had on a two-piece black bathing suit. The top was a halter top and the bottom had small ruffles around it. She had pulled a white cropped hoodie over herself and she was wearing a pair of white shorts. *"Oh dear god is she trying to kill me?!"* he was pulled out of his reverie when she smacked him, rather hard on the shoulder. His eyes quickly flew from the trail of her milky skin and to her face, a blush covering his cheeks.

"What?" he asked. She raised an eyebrow.

"I asked if you were sure you didn't want to swim?"

"Err..." he swallowed, his throat feeling dry. "Yeah, I'm sure." Still giving him a bemused look she turned back to Catherine, who had been watching them silently and pulled the large white t-shirt she was wearing over her head. She was wearing a yellow and white polka dotted one piece with a white ruffle around it and Hermione and pulled her hair back into a thick braid. As soon as she had taken the shirt off of the child Hermione began pulling the hoodie and shorts off. Harry had to squeeze his eyes shut or he knew he might lose it and snog her right there. He kept his eyes shut until he heard a splash and the sound of giggles.

Hermione had jumped into the water with Catherine in her arms and they were now splashing each other. Hermione brought the little girl over to the shallow end and then dived under the water. He watched as her sleek body came closer to him, he quickly pulled his feet out of the water and tucked them under him. Hermione popped back on to the surface and pushed strands of her wet hair out of her face and pouted up at him.

"You're no fun Harry." He looked down silently into her warm brown eyes. They sparkled with mischief and happiness. He watched as a droplet of water ran down her face and onto her lips, she slipped out a small pink tongue and licked it away. He couldn't take this anymore.

Without a word he jumped out of his seat and jogged up the stairs. He blew past Bronson and Caterina without a word and ran back to

his room. As soon as he was there he closed the door behind him and threw himself onto his bed, pulling a pillow over his face. *"What is wrong with me?!"*

A few minutes later the door flew open and Hermione stormed in. She had pulled her hoodie back on but had forgotten her shorts. The jacket clung to her damp skin. He shot up at stared at the enraged girl.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" she shouted. His eyes narrowed at her tone.

"Nothing is wrong." She snorted and threw her hands into the air.

"Of course! Nothing is ever wrong!" she strode over to him and he quickly stood up. "You've been treating me like shit all week long!" his eyes widened, he had never heard her curse before. "You've ignored me! You've been rude to me! You've pushed me away! Why do you always do that?! Why do you always keep things from me?!"

"I don't always keep things from you!" he shouted back. She was really starting to piss him off. "Is it so wrong for me to not want to share *every little thing* with you?!"

"You don't have to share *"every little thing"* with me but when you start treating me like you have no care for me I think I deserve and explanation!" his eyes flared with anger and frustration and he took several steps forward causing her to take a few steps backward.

"You think I don't care for you?" his voice had fallen to a near whisper. He continued to walk toward her and she kept walking backwards, shocked by the anger in his face. Soon her back hit the wall and she stared up at him in fear. Their noses were nearly touching.

"You have no *idea*" she felt his breath touch her lips and she knew if she licked them her tongue would touch his lips. "How much I care about you." He closed the gap between them, his lips pressing hungrily against hers.

A/N: Yay! He finally kissed her! Here's some background info on Catherine (I forgot to put it in last chapter): Here mother was adopted from France when she was three years old, Catherine's

father died in a car crash when she was a year old. His parents had also died when he was in his late twenties. So it was just her and her mom until her mom was also killed.

I also forgot to say last chapter that those songs were (in this order) I Bloom Blaum- Coldplay and I Will Follow You into the Dark- Death Cab for Cutie. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed, y'all don't know how much it lights up my day to see such great reviews! I love it when you send in your thoughts and suggestions, they always help me to come up with new ideas and they always make me want to write faster. Thanks again for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 12

"You have no *idea*" she felt his breath touch her lips and she knew if she licked them her tongue would touch his lips. "How much I care about you." He closed the gap between them, his lips pressing hungrily against hers.

Hermione didn't move for moment, shocked at what he was doing. Soon she stopped thinking and kissed him back just as hungrily. He pushed her more firmly against the wall, her hands threaded through his hair and her leg wrapped around his waist.

A shiver ran down her spine when his hands caressed her bare stomach.

This kiss soon deepened with Harry's tongue slipping into Hermione's welcoming mouth. He reached behind her and lifted her up so both her legs had to wrap around his waist. Her back arched and her hands gripped his shoulders. A moan bubbled from his chest.

Soon the need for air forced them apart. They were both breathing heavily. Harry leaned his forehead against hers and looked into her eyes.

"Did you just kiss me?" Hermione whispered breathlessly. He licked his lips.

"Yeah, I think I did." Hermione's hands dropped from his shoulders and to his chest.

"Why?" she asked. He looked away, his face taking on a deep red hue. She reached up and turned his face back to her. "Tell me why." Her voice sounded almost desperate. He looked directly into her eyes. His breath left him. He swallowed. "*Even if she hates me forever, I have to tell her.*"

"I love you." He whispered. Her eyes widened.

"You..." her lips trembled. "You love me?" he nodded with difficulty.

“Look, I know that you probably don’t feel the same way-” he was cut off when Hermione suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck and captured his lips with her own. She kissed him with absolute desperation, with a need that she hadn’t known she had.

When she finally released him they were once again out of breath.

“I love you too.” She whispered. Her grinned and leaned forward and kissed her again. Unlike the kisses before this one it was sweet and tender. He gently set her down on the floor and released her lips.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do that.” He said. She giggled and ran a hand down his chest.

“I think I do.” She whispered. She reached up and fiddled with the neckline of his shirt. “So...how long have you had these...feelings?” she asked, her cheeks becoming red. His eyes and hands trailed the slight dusting of freckles on her arms.

“I don’t know...a month, a year, since the moment I met you.” His gaze once again locked onto hers. “It really hit me a few days ago when you stepped out of the bathroom looking all fresh and clean” she giggled at his choice of words “it was like you looked exactly the same but completely different at the same time. You smiled at me and I just...I couldn’t believe how beautiful and *perfect* you were!” he shook his head with an awed look on his face. “It amazed me that I hadn’t seen it before, that I hadn’t know.” He reached over and wiped away a tear that had fallen from her dark orbs. “How could I have ignored the way I was feeling about you? How could I ignore how much I loved you?” he said softly. She sniffed and took a shaky breath.

“Why me? I mean out of all the girls that’ll probably be throwing themselves at you why would you pick me the annoying little know-it-all!” she asked brokenly. He shook his head in bewilderment.

“Are you kidding me ‘Mi?!’ he exclaimed. “You’re beautiful, intelligent, kind, loving, sweet, passionate, and anyone would be damn lucky to have you! Why would I want any other girl when I already have the perfect one?”

"You know, if you were trying to make me fall in love with you I can say you succeeded a thousand times over." She chuckled through her tears. He gave her a small warm smile.

"I'm not just trying to make you fall in love with me." He said seriously. "I mean it." She looked searchingly into his eyes and a small smile appeared on her face.

"I know." She said softly. She stood on her toes and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "And I love you for it." He smiled against her lips and deepened the kiss.

"I can't believe we've wasted six years *not* kissing!" he said when he finally forced himself to pull away from her. A wild grin was on his face. He felt giddy, like all of a sudden the world was right. This was definitely one of the happiest moments in his life.

"Now, when did you...you know?" he flushed and she giggled.

"Second year." She stated. "It was right after I woke up in the hospital wing. I remember how horrible I felt when no one was there waiting. Then Madame Pomfrey told me how you had sat with me everyday...then I walked into the great hall and there you were, sitting at the Gryffindor table, that cute little grin of yours on your face and those big green eyes sparkling and looking at me with the happiest expression I had ever seen on your face. I ran to you and hugged you and it just fit. Me and you. It felt right." She looked up at him with a loving smile on her face. "It *is* right." He kissed her again.

"It is." He whispered. The door to their bedroom swung open and their heads swung toward the doorway. Standing there with her little hands on her hips and a smile on her face was a still damp Catherine.

"Ever heard of knocking little miss?" Hermione asked. The little girl shook her head, a serious expression on her face. Harry chuckled and lifted the child into his arms, tickling her sides. She giggled and batted his hands away.

"Did you like the conservatory?" he asked. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Yes." She stated simply, her voice slightly rasped with disuse. Harry's eyebrows shot up and Hermione's mouth dropped open.

"Err...okay...are you going to be talking now?" he asked hesitantly. Hermione smacked him on the arm. Catherine shrugged. The little girl's stomach suddenly growled and she gave them a sheepish look.

"Hungry?" he smirked. She blushed slightly but nodded. "Well then lets not keep the lady waiting!" she stuck her tongue out at him and he turned her upside down.

"Ready to eat Hermione?" he asked over the child's squealing. Her face was turning red.

"As soon as you pick her back up!" he pouted and pulled her back right-side-up.

"You always ruin my fun." She shook her head and pushed him towards the door.

"Now go take her downstairs so I can change." He turned back to her and gave her a smirk, his eyes trailing down her body.

"Why?" her face flushed and she continued pushing him to the door.

"Get out!" she closed the door behind them.

"Well that wasn't very nice." He mumbled. The little girl giggled.

He groaned as he hit the wall for the tenth time that day.

"Come on Harry! You have to control your magic!" Remus said. Harry rolled his eyes and got back into standing position. They had been going through various situations where the Reductor Curse could be used. He had explained to Remus that he had already used the Reductor during the attack at the shopping center and the end result but the older man had told him that he needed to master how to lower the power of the spell. He couldn't just "Go around blowing things up." As the man had said. Unfortunately he was having trouble with it and he kept pouring too much power into the spell and ended up blowing

up the dummy and sending himself clear across the room and into the wall.

"Let's try this again Harry." Remus sighed and repaired the dummy. Harry forced himself to once again raise his wand.

"**Reducto**" he said as calmly as possible, forcing himself to calm his emotions and concentrate on the flow of the magic through his body and through his wand. The dummy shook and his entire torso was blown off.

"You did it!" Remus shouted and gave Harry a firm pat on the back. Harry grunted and gave him a wan smile.

"Great." He muttered with a wince. He felt like hell. He was completely sore from head to foot and he was exhausted. The older man gave him an understanding smile.

"I think it's time for us to call it a night." He once again repaired the dummy and put his wand in his pocket. They made their way out the room and down the stairs.

"I think we're about ready to start working on Non-Verbal casting." Remus said as they walked.

"Non-verbal?"

"Yes, it's ideal to know how to cast a spell without speaking the incantation. Say if you're hiding and you want to curse a deatheater but don't want to be seen you can." They walked the rest of the way to the family room and Remus pulled him into a short friendly hug.

"Bye Cub."

"See you later Moony." After Remus disappeared through the flames he trudged up the stairs and into his room. Not seeing Hermione he collapsed on the bed with a sigh and before he knew it he was asleep.

Soft hands were gently running through his hair and someone was humming. He forced himself to crack his eyes open.

"I see you're awake." Hermione's voice said from above him. He squinted to make out her face in the soft light from the fireplace. His head was resting in her lap and with one of her hands she was running her fingers through his hair. She held a yellowing book in the other hand.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked sleepily.

"Only about two hours." He nodded and stifled a yawn. She gave him an amused glance. "You can go back to sleep if you'd like Harry." He shook his head and reluctantly sat up.

"Nah, I need to go take a shower." He rolled himself out of bed and grabbed a change of clothes. He stopped in the doorway of the bathroom and looked back at the girl on the bed, a slow smirk appearing on his face. "You can join me if you'd like." He said wagging his eyebrows. A smirk also appeared on her face and she slid off the bed. She walked slowly over to him. His eyes widened with every step she took. He'd only been joking! She stooped in front of him and twined her arms around his neck. She stood on her toes and placed a slow sensual kiss on his lips. When she pulled away from him he was completely dazed.

"In your dreams." She said then slapped him on the back of the head. All he could do was stare at her as she made her way back to the bed and picked up her book. He shook himself out of his trance.

"That was mean 'Mi." he grumbled. She just laughed at him. Still grumbling he went into the bathroom and took his shower.

When he stepped out of the bathroom he sat on the bed next to Hermione. She didn't even look up from her book when he sat on the bed. Her face was a mask of absolute concentration.

"Hermione?" she jumped at the sound of his voice. Her hand flew to her chest.

"Where did you come from?! Didn't anyone ever tell you not to sneak up on people?!" he barely heard her, he was too busy laughing. "It's not funny Harry!"

"Your-Your face!" he managed to choke out. He put a hand on his chest and faked a look of surprise then collapsed into another bout of laughter. When he finally calmed himself he looked back at Hermione who had gone back to her book.

"Are you quite finished?" she asked. He grinned.

"Yep!" she rolled her eyes and closed the book then turned so she was facing him. Her face took on a serious expression and her eyes looked worried.

"What's wrong 'Mi?" he asked concerned.

"It's-It's about Catherine." She ran a shaky hand through her dark curls. "She can't just *stay* with us. We don't have any kind of right to her at all! If someone tried to take her away from us...we'd lose her." Her eyes were filled with unshed tears.

"We won't lose her 'Mi." he whispered though he wasn't so sure. Truthfully the same thought had been running through his mind for the past week. He knew that without having any kind of legal right to her that someone could easily take her away from them and it killed him to know that. Hermione shook her head.

"You know just as well as I that it's a possibility." she took a deep breath "I've been thinking about this for a while. I searched all through the library trying to find a way to prevent it from happening. It took me quite a while but I found something." She picked her book back up and turned it to a page she had marked. She handed him the book. For the first time he noticed the title of the book. ***Sanguineus Magus/Blood Magic***. He looked down at the yellowing pages.

Magus Adoptio/ Magical Adoption. His eyes flew to Hermione's face. He swallowed thickly and took a breath.

"I know this is a big step Harry but I *know* this is what we need to do." She said firmly.

"This is more than just a big step 'Mi! This is...this is having a *child*! Becoming *parents*!" Hermione reached over and held his hands in hers.

"We *are* her parents Harry." Her voice had dropped to a near whisper. "Don't you see that? And would we have ever given her to someone else? Do you think we would have just waited until she was happier and give her away? No, we wouldn't have." Harry looked into her eyes. He knew she was right, he knew that no matter what he would have raised her anyway. Somewhere along the road he had fallen head over heels for her, she was a part of him now.

"You're right. We are her parents and we need to do this." He squeezed her hands. "Are we ready for this? Are we ready to do this?" she squeezed his hands in return and smiled.

"Yes." She said firmly "We are ready." He smiled and pulled her into his arms.

He had always dreamed of having a family and now he finally would. He was with the woman he loved and they were about to adopt a daughter. Things were finally coming together. He released her and she sat next to him.

"So what exactly does a magical adoption entail?" he asked.

"Well, it's really pretty clear cut." She began. "All you need to do is brew a potion. It's actually quite simple but it needs both our blood and Catherine's." He winced "But only a drop. It takes at least two days to brew but once it is finished it needs to be ingested immediately. It'll change her, she'll take on our features. Our blood will run through her veins. She'll be our child." "*I love the sound of that. 'Our Child'*" he thought. She took a breath and looked directly into his eyes. "The catch is that once Catherine drinks the potion it'll cause her a lot of pain." His eyes widened.

"No." he said firmly "No way. I promised myself I would *never* put her through any pain." Hermione sighed and threaded his fingers through hers.

"I hate it too but it's the only way." He closed his eyes briefly then sighed.

"Ok. I understand. What kind of pain will she be going through?"

"I'm not completely sure but it won't be pleasant. Her entire bone structure will change. Her facial features, her hair, her body, her eyes. It's a lot to put a body through at one time." He sighed again and with the hand that Hermione wasn't holding he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Can we give her something before hand to dull the pain?" Hermione shook her head sadly.

"No. If anything else is in her bloodstream it will mix with the potion and it could become fatal." He nodded again. They sat in silence, each caught up in his or her own thoughts when Harry broke it.

"Wait!" Hermione's eyes shot to him in alarm. "We haven't even asked her what *she* wants." She slapped herself on the forehead.

"You're right! We're sitting here planning her future without even talking to her about it!" Harry went to stand up but she caught his elbow. "We can't go ask her now! It's already 2am, she's asleep." He smiled a sheepish smile and sank back onto the soft mattress.

"Yeah, I guess we can talk to her about it when she wakes up. I guess I'm kind of excited" they laid under the covers.

"Me too." Hermione said, laying her head on his chest. "I haven't felt this anxious since I took my O.W.L's!" he chuckled and wrapped his arms around her.

"I feel almost as nervous as I did the first time I played Quidditch." Hermione lifted her head from his chest.

"I can't believe we're doing this. We're going to *adopt* her!" she whispered her eyes were wide and sparkling.

"Me neither." she shifted and bit her lip.

"Do you know what this means Harry? Not just for Catherine but for us too. By doing this we're...we're saying that we're going to be together forever." He stared deeply into her eyes.

“There’s no one else I’d rather be with.” He leaned down and placed a kiss on her forehead. “I like the idea of spending forever with you.” She smiled softly and laid her head back on his chest.

“I like the idea of spending forever with you too.” He grinned and pulled the covers more firmly around them.

They awoke to an insistent beeping from the table in front of the fireplace.

“Wha’s ‘at?” Hermione mumbled sleepily. Harry shook his head a few times to clear out the cobwebs which only helped slightly. His eyes glanced towards the table and his eyes widened. He flew out of bed. On the table was a small crystal dragon. It was roaring (or beeping) and a bright light glowed from it’s belly.

“What’s going on?” Hermione asked as she stumbled out of bed, now slightly more awake.

“It’s Catherine. She’s scared.” He said as he picked up the dragon and pressed it’s nose. It instantly went silent. He replaced the statue and he and Hermione jogged out of the room.

Without pausing to knock Harry wrenched open the door. The little girl was curled up in her pink pajamas, her back against the headboard, her eyes wide with fear and fresh tear tracks were on her face. She was clutching her bear and the dragon to her chest.

As soon as she realized who had burst into her room she jumped of the bed and straight into Harry’s arms. The child collapsed into sobs. Harry rocked her back and forth and whispered comforting words into her ears. He eased down onto the soft mattress and Hermione sat next to them, rubbing Catherine’s back. After a few minutes her sobs faded into quiet sniffles and hiccups.

“What happened, love?” Harry whispered. She pulled back slightly and rubbed her eyes.

“Bad dream.” She croaked. She had been having nightmares for a while now. Constantly seeing her mother being murdered every time she closed her eyes.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Hermione asked softly. The little girl shook her head. “Ok, we don’t have to.” After a while she wiggled out of Harry’s arms and sat between them. Hermione wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed her forehead then gave Harry a pointed look.

‘Now?’ he mouthed to her and she nodded. He took a breath and got on the floor to kneel in front of her.

“Catherine?” her eyes shot to him. It must be serious, Harry never calls her by her full name. “Hermione and I have something we need to talk to you about.” He glanced again at Hermione and she gave him a reassuring look. “You see, since Hermione and I aren’t your family we really aren’t allowed to keep you.” He winced as soon as he saw her face. He had phrased that badly. Her eyes had widened and a look of fear and pain came over her face.

“It’s ok Kitty-Cat! That’s not what I meant.” The little girl’s eyes shot to Hermione who nodded then she calmed down and looked back at Harry. “We really want you to stay with us. We love you.” Her eyes filled with tears. “We love you very, very much and we want to make you a part of our family. We want to adopt you.” The tears spilled from her eyes and she looked at them, her eyes searching both their faces. “Would you like that?”

“Yes!” she said. He felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of his chest. She threw her arms around his neck and then grabbed Hermione’s hand and pulled her closer to them and she wrapped her arms around both of them. After she released them and pulled back he could see the happiness in her eyes. For as long as she had been with them he had never seen her that happy. When they had all settled back onto the floor Hermione continued where he left off.

“You need to know that magical adoption is a very different than normal adoption.” She said seriously and the child nodded. “For us to adopt you you’ll have to drink a potion”

“Why?” she asked. Hearing her talk was going to take a lot of getting used to. Harry and Hermione’s eyes met. This was the difficult part.

“Well you see Cattie, the potion will change you...you’ll look like us, like our daughter.” Her eyes widened and her mouth formed an “O”. “But it’s not going to be easy Cattie, it’s going to hurt really bad.” She swallowed hard. “If you don’t want to do it Cattie it’s ok. We won’t force you to do this.” The child looked down at her lap, her lips were pressed tightly together.

Her head came back up and she looked at them with determination written on her face.

“I want to.” She said firmly. They smiled at her and she returned it. Her eyes turned away from them and wandered to the picture on the mantle. The smile dropped from her face and an unsure expression took its place.

“What’s wrong Cattie?” Hermione asked. The little girl bit her lip and dropped her gaze to her lap. Harry looked to where Catherine had been staring. “*Oh.*” He understood. He reached over and gently lifted her face.

“Is this about your parents?” she nodded and looked away. “You’re worried that if you do this you’ll be saying you don’t want to be their daughter anymore? That you’re turning your back on them?” she nodded tearfully.

“Catherine, no matter who you live with, how different you look, or who becomes your family they will *a/ways* be your parents.” He said firmly. “I can tell you that they loved you much more than you’ll ever know. They’d want you to be happy and taken care of. Do you understand?” She nodded again and brushed a stray tear from her cheek.

“Yeah.” He pulled her into another hug and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. When he released her Hermione pulled her into her arms and stood up.

“We have a long day tomorrow, we’ll need to get some sleep.” She said. The little girl wrapped her arms more firmly around Hermione and looked fearfully at her large bed.

"Can-Can I sleep with you?" she asked in a small voice. Harry reached over and brushed a strand of fair hair out of her eyes and Hermione gave her a soft smile.

"Of course you can." Hermione carried her out of the room. Before he left the room Harry grabbed the crystal dragon and shrunk it to the size of a thimble, he then plucked a stray thread from Catherine's blanket and transfigured it into a thin gold chain. He threaded the chain through the small dragon and slipped it into the pocket of his pajama pants then followed them out of the room.

They curled up in bed, Catherine nestled between them. When both the girls had fallen asleep Harry sat up and leaned against the headboard. He watched them sleep feeling absolutely dumfounded. He had a family. He was going to be someone's *father*! He hadn't ever thought, ever *imagined* that he would be someone's parent, that he would one day grow up and get married and have kids. I just wasn't something he had ever really seen for himself but now...now the thought of it filled him with happiness. When he looked at the two girls next to him he felt such a fierce rush of love, of protectiveness. It excited him but at the same time it scared the crap out of him.

Catherine shifted in her sleep and grabbed a handful of his shirt. He lovingly placed a hand on her head. The happiness defiantly outweighed the fear.

He allowed himself to sink down back under the warm covers and he snuggled closer to his family.

His life would change forever, he was taking on a huge responsibility but he wouldn't trade it for the world.

There was a weight on his chest. He cracked his eyes open and met a pair of large dark blue orbs.

"Good morning! You been sleep for ages!" Catherine exclaimed cheerfully. She was sitting on his chest, fully dressed in a yellow sun dress with her hair loose and grinning down at him. He tiredly rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Morning Kitty-Cat.” He said sleepily. He looked around the room. “Where’s Hermione?”

“She’s doing the potion.” She said simply. He nodded with a yawn and sat up. The little girl jumped off of him bounced on the mattress.

“Can we go outside?” she asked. He shrugged and yawned again.

“Sure.” She smiled and clapped her hands. “As soon as I take my shower we’ll go outside.” she nodded. He gave her a kiss on the forehead then slid out of bed and grabbed an outfit out of the wardrobe.

When he came back into the room Catherine was sitting on the floor tying her lace-up white sandals.

“When did you learn how to tie your shoes?” he asked.

“My mommy taught me.” She said and her eyes became sad. He smiled sadly and lifted her into his arms.

“It’s going to be ok Cattie.” He said softly. “One day you’ll be able to think about your parents and you won’t feel so sad. One day you’ll be able to think about all the good times you had with them and you won’t hurt so much.” She gave him a doubtful look. “A few months ago my godfather died.” He took a shaky breath. “And when I was just a baby my parents were also killed. I miss them all so much and even though my parents died a very long time ago and I don’t remember them much I still love them. I still think about them and when I feel really scared or alone I think about how much they loved me, how much they cared about me and I feel better. It’s only been a few months since my godfather died and even though sometimes when I think about him I feel hurt and sad I can still think about all the good times we had together, all the fun we had. I know it feels like the pain will never go away, that you’ll never be able to think about them and not want to cry one day it will get better. You will feel better.”

“Promise?” she asked in a small voice. He hugged her closer.

“Promise.” He whispered into her hair. She gave a mighty sniff then released his neck. With his free hand he reached into the back pocket

of his jeans and pulled out the chain. "I made something for you Kitty-Cat." He slipped the necklace over her head. "This is the dragon I gave you; I want you to wear this at all times. If you ever need me or you feel scared all you have to do is hold it tight in your hands." She fingered the delicate piece of jewelry.

"Thank you." She said softly and hugged him again. He placed a kiss on her brow then released her.

"Now, I thought we were going outside." She grinned happily and nodded. He swung her over his back and carried her piggy-back out the door.

"Can we go get my ball?" Catherine asked.

"Sure!" he spun in a circle, causing the child on his back to shriek and turned the knob on the door next to his and went in. He kneeled down to let the little girl off of his back. She jogged across the room and to her toy box, hurriedly pulling a bouncy red ball. When she had clambered back onto his back they continued their trek down the stairs and out the back door.

As soon as he set her down on the grass she was off. She ran happily through the grass bouncing her ball, her bright hair streaming behind her. *"I've missed seeing her so happy."*

When she noticed he wasn't behind her she turned to him with a hand on her hips.

"Well aren't you coming to play?" she asked him impatiently.

"I'm coming!" He grinned and started towards her. They spent hours playing outside. They played catch, tag, hide and seek, they even raced (he let her win).

After a while Catherine *finally* began to tire out and they rested in the large wicker swing from the picture of his family. Sitting in the swing with Catherine on his lap, the sun shining gently through the leaves of the large tree and the comforting silence of the land around them he felt content, comfortable, happy.

He rested his chin on top of the child's head and allowed himself to relax. To just enjoy the small moment of comfort.

"When you adopt me will you be my daddy?" he was torn out of his thoughts by Catherine's small voice. He swallowed his shock at the question and answered awkwardly.

"Err...Yes, I will be."

"Oh." She said softly. They sat in silence another couple of minutes until Catherine once again broke it.

"Can I call you daddy?" his heart skipped a beat and he licked his suddenly dry lips.

"Of course." He felt her nod against his chest.

"Ok, Daddy." He felt a stinging behind his eyes. He hugged her closer to him and kissed her hair. His stomach suddenly growled and Catherine giggled.

"Hungry?" she teased. He tickled her and placed her on the ground then stood up from the swing.

"Yes I am, I think it's time for us to go inside." She pouted but grabbed her ball. He clasped her hand and they started back towards the cottage. DeeDi met them at the door.

"Master!" she exclaimed twisting the bottom of her dress. "Mistress Hermy won't come down to eat!" he nodded worriedly.

"Ok, I'll get her to come down. Can you take Catherine to the dining room?" the elf nodded. "Thank you DeeDi."

"Come along little miss." She said. Catherine followed her into the house and around the corner. When they were out of sight Harry jogged up the stairs and to the third floor.

He said good morning to Bronson and Caterina then headed for a dark wood door. Turning the heavy gold knob he stepped into the potions lab.

It was a large light wood paneled room with a light wood floor. One side of the room was filled with shelves of potions ingredients, from the most mundane and common to some of the rarest and deadliest. The other wall was lined with shelves of potions supplies, cauldrons, beakers, vials, everything one would need for potions. The one and only window in the room was a large circular window surrounded by colorful stained glass, it took up an entire wall at the far end of the room. There was a door on one wall that led to a smaller room which housed a collection of potions. Everything from healing potions to hair growth potions. There were also four tables in the middle of the room and standing in front of one, a simmering cauldron in front of her, was

“Hermione.” Her head snapped from the potion in front of her and turned to him a small smile appearing on her tired face.

“Hey Harry, I saw you and Catherine outside.” She said gesturing towards the window. He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her waist, peering over her shoulder.

“Yeah, she wanted to go play.” He answered. “You need to eat ‘Mi” she sighed and rolled her eyes.

“And I will, as soon as I can get the potion to the point where I can leave it. I just need to add a few more ingredients and then it has to simmer overnight.” He released her and plopped down on a stool next to her.

“Alright then, I’ll wait.” She shook her head at him and a strand of hair fell out of the messy bun she had pulled it into. They sat in a comfortable silence while Hermione carefully added ingredients. When she added the last strand of Acromantula web and began to stir the now vivid red potion Harry began to speak.

“Cattie call me Daddy.” Though she never stopped stirring Hermione’s eyes shot to him in surprise.

“Really?” he nodded and rested his chin in his hands.

“She asked me if once we adopted her would I be her daddy and I said yes then she asked if she could call me daddy...when I said she could she says “Ok, Daddy.”...” Hermione smiled at his awed face.

"You'd never think that a simple word could make you feel so...I can't even describe it." She stirred the potion clockwise three times then counterclockwise two more times then placed the spoon on the table. She placed her arms loosely around his neck.

"You're a dad now, Harry." She said softly and he grinned.

"I know." She hugged him and he kissed her behind the ear. When he released her he stepped off of the stool and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Now, let's go down to lunch." After giving the potion a worried glance Hermione nodded and allowed Harry to lead her out of the room and to the dining room.

Catherine was still eating when they walked in. As soon as they took their seats food appeared in front of them and Harry dug in with vigor.

"Did you have fun outside, Cattie?" Hermione asked. The little girl nodded vigorously.

"Yep! Daddy and I played for *hours!*" Hermione smiled at the child's excitement and the easy way the word 'Daddy' slipped out of her mouth. They spent the rest of their lunch chatting happily about the games Harry and Catherine played. Well it was mostly Catherine speaking and Harry and Hermione listening and laughing at the little girl's cheerful narration of their time outside. It was amazing how much she was talking, the complete turnaround she seemed to have made. It lifted a huge weight off of both their shoulders to see her so happy.

When lunch was over both Hermione and Catherine headed to the library, the child still chattering happily, and Harry went to the family room. Remus would be here in a few minutes.

The man said he would have to be coming earlier today because there was to be a full moon tonight. He had tried to convince him that he didn't have to come today, he knew the man would be stone tired and not in any kind of condition to be dueling. He had replied that he didn't plan on dueling with him, he was just going to explain to him how to use Non-Verbal spells.

Harry sighed and sunk down into one of the insanely comfortable armchairs in the family room. He was just beginning to relax when the large fireplace flared green and Remus stepped through the flames. Harry jumped to his feet and walked to the man and winced. He looked like he was ready to fall asleep right then and there. He was extremely pale and dark bags were under his eyes.

"You sure you're up to this Moony?" he asked grabbing the man's elbow when he swayed slightly. "You look like hell." The older man stood up straighter and shook Harry's arm off.

"Well hello to you too." He said grumpily. He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "Let's get this over with." He muttered and headed out of the room, Harry following close behind. He raised an eyebrow at the man's back.

"Well that wasn't very nice." Remus turned back to him.

"I'm sorry, Cub" he said tiredly "I can get a little ill-humored before my transformation."

"S'ok" he shrugged then a mischievous grin made its way onto his face. "I understand, it's that time of the month." Remus glared at him.

"You know, that's not funny. Not one bit." He started up the stairs "Your father and Sirius used to think that was one of the most hilarious jokes ever." He smiled sadly. They continued up to the third floor in silence. Before they went into the dueling room Remus stopped and peeked into the potions lab which door they had left open.

"What are you making?" he asked, jerking his thumb in the direction of the simmering potion. Harry licked his lip nervously and grabbed Remus's arm and pulled him into the dueling room. When he had closed the door behind them he turned to the confused man.

"We're brewing the ***Magus Adoptio*** potion." The werewolf's eye widened.

"Th-The ***Magus Adoptio***?! Magical adoption?!" he ran a shaky hand through his gray streaked hair. "I'm guessing you plan on using this

with Catherine?" when Harry nodded he grabbed his shoulders. "Harry...This is a serious commitment! Do you understand what you're doing?! She will be your daughter *forever!*" Harry looked the man square in his amber eyes.

"Yes Moony, I know what we're doing. Hermione and I *love* Catherine. We want her to be our daughter." Remus released his shoulders.

"You and Hermione? You're doing this together?"

"Of course. We love each other and we love her. She's practically our daughter anyway this is just to make it official...to really become a family." The man searched his face for a minute then nodded.

"I understand Harry" he clapped him on the shoulder "I know you'll take care of her. I'm proud of you cub." Harry smiled at the man before him.

"Thanks Moony." Before the silence could become awkward Remus sat down on one of the mats and gestured for Harry to sit across from him.

"Ok, Non-Verbal spells. Non-Verbal spells are a great tool in dueling. It contains the element of surprise, you can't reflect or resist it if you don't see it coming. The downside of using a non-verbal spell in a duel is that it takes a large amount of concentration and usually when you're in a duel you can't spare any concentration that's why the wizards that can master it usually only use it when they are hiding or the other person cannot see them. It's a lot of work to learn so most people, if they can do it at all, only use it for small spells such as **Accio** or **Alohomora**. We'll be starting with such spells then moving on the bigger and badder ones. Wand out." Harry pulled his wand from his pocket. "You really should find somewhere else to keep that."

"I plan on it." Harry said with a roll of his eyes.

"Ok, we'll start with the **Accio**. Summon the statue of the man with the bow and arrow."

“Accio Statue!” the statue flew from the shelf and into Harry’s hand. He turned back to the man and raised an eyebrow.

“Now, how did you feel when you performed the spell?”

“Err...fine?” Remus shook his head.

“No, how did the *magic* feel? What did you feel physically when you summoned the statue?”

“Well I guess I felt a wave of energy come from my chest and through my arm?” the man grinned.

“Exactly! You see every bit of magic you perform flows from your magical core and through your wand. When you say the spell your mind automatically thinks of the end result of the spell, what’s going to happen when you pull the magic from your core and force it through your wand. That’s the trouble most wizards have with it, they can’t make their mind think of the end result without speaking the words! The key to non-verbal spell work is to make your mind think of the end result *without* speaking the incantation of the spell.”

They spent the next few hours trying to summon the statues from the shelf without speaking the incantation. He tried hard, tried to imagine the end result beforehand like Remus told him but it was a lot more difficult than it sounded. It was like his mind couldn’t grasp it at all. Remus told him it would take some time but he was confident that he’d get it.

It was starting to get late and Remus wanted to make sure he was back at Grimmauld before it got dark. Before he left through the fireplace Remus pulled Harry into a hug.

“See you in a couple of days Cub.” Harry returned the hug.

“Yeah, see you Moony.” The older man released him and clapped him on the back.

“Good luck Harry.” He took a handful of floo powder out of a glass jar on top of the mantle and threw it into the flames.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" After he disappeared through the flames Harry went upstairs and into the library where the girls were. They were both sitting in front of the fire; Hermione curled up in one of the lush armchairs with another book on wizarding families and Catherine lying on her stomach on the rug with **Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them**. She was developing an almost Hagrid like fascination with magical creatures. He walked over to them and sat on the arm of Hermione's chair.

"Hey" Hermione looked up from her book and smiled at him.

"Hey yourself how did your training go?" she asked. He sighed and sunk down next to her, forcing her to scoot over. He laid his head on her shoulder.

"It could have been better." He mumbled. She giggled slightly and rubbed his arm.

"Don't worry about it, love. You'll get it."

"Yeah, I know." He sighed. Catherine looked up from her book and grinned.

"Are there really unicorns?!" she asked excitedly. When Hermione nodded she squealed happily and went back to her book. Harry turned back to Hermione.

"What are you reading?"

"**The Power of the Pure: Powerful Pure-Blood Families.** I've been trying to find more information on the Gaunt family. I'm hoping to find a clue to where he might be hiding the Horcruxes." She sighed and shook her head. "There isn't much, all I've found is that they were indeed descended from Salazar Slytherin, They were once an extremely wealthy and influential family but they were reduced to poverty because of their negligence with their money and not to mention the borderline insanity they were all inflicted with do to inbreeding." She shivered in disgust. "They were deep believers in blood purity so they would only marry their cousins or other pure-blood witches and wizards. They were even more concerned with keeping their Slytherin lineage, that's why they married into their own

family. The continuous inbreeding and what appears to have been severe isolation led to a diminished family of very disturbed and antisocial individuals.” She closed the book and laid it on her lap. “I think we’ll need to go to the muggle world and find out more about the Riddle’s. Maybe even go to his old orphanage.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” Harry said. He looked over at Catherine who was blinking sleepily and yawning. He stood up from the chair and knelt in front of the tired child.

“Ready for bed?” he asked softly. She yawned again and shook her head. “Yeah, I think you are. Go take your bath and I’ll be up later to tuck you in, ok?” the little girl sighed and stood up, tucking the book under her arm.

“Ok” she trudged out of the room, a pout on her face. He turned to Hermione who was grinning up at him.

“Listen to you, sounding like a dad.”

“I feel like one.”

Two days later at nearly 12 o’clock in the morning they were all sitting in the potions lab. The potion was finally in its last stage, all that they needed to do now was add their blood.

“Ok” Hermione said, picking up a small knife. “Let’s begin.” Harry lifted Catherine up and placed her on a stool next to the table. Hermione took a deep breath and pricked her finger with the knife. She held her finger over the deep red bubbling potion and let a drop of her blood fall into it. The potion flashed white then returned to its original color. The small wound on her finger closed immediately. She handed the knife to Harry and he repeated the action. Catherine watched them anxiously.

“Cattie” the little girl turned her worried eyes to Hermione. “We just need to prick your finger a little bit, ok? I promise it won’t hurt.” Catherine swallowed thickly and nodded, stretching her arm out to Hermione. She held the small hand in hers, palm up, and gently pricked the child’s finger. Hermione stretched her arm out over the cauldron and let a small drop of blood fall into it. The potion once

again flashed white but instead of going back to red it turned a shocking shade of electric blue. As soon as the potion changed color Hermione ladled some of it into a goblet then handed it to Catherine. She looked at the two of them fearfully.

"It's going to be ok Cattie." Hermione said softly.

"We'll be right here." Harry agreed. The little girl licked her lips then downed the potion in one gulp. For a couple of minutes nothing happened then all of a sudden Catherine gasped and wrapped her arms around her middle. She swayed and Hermione hurriedly picked her up before she fell to the floor. An anguished scream ripped from her throat and Hermione hugged her closer to her. Her pained eyes met Harry's. She looked just as lost as he felt. She sank to the floor, holding tight to the screaming and crying child. Harry sat next them and wrapped his arms around the both of them.

They watched, murmuring comforting words to the child as she went through the transformation. At first it didn't seem as if anything was happening but soon her hair became thicker and curly and it grew to her waist. It began to darken, becoming a dark chocolate brown. Her eyes were closed tightly but they could see them change shape, changing into almond shaped and thick dark eyelashes grew quickly. Her nose became smaller and a dusting of freckled appeared on the bridge, her eyebrows took on a delicate arch, her mouth widened and turned a shade darker, her fingers became long and thin.

For hours they sat with the child, watching as her features changed. After a while Catherine's cries quieted to soft sniffles and dry sobs, soon she fell into a fitful sleep.

"Harry" Hermione said softly, pulling Harry out of his awed staring at the changed child in her arms. "Can you go into the potion cupboard and get the Draught of Peace and Sleeping Draught, please?" Harry nodded and stood up from the ground then went to the small room. After he grabbed the desired potions off of the shelf and headed back to the room.

They carefully dripped the potions into the child's mouth, gently rubbing her throat so she would swallow. Once she had ingested the

potions they carried her to her room and gently laid her under the covers. They sat on the bed beside her.

"That was the right thing to do, right?" Hermione asked. Harry reached over and held her hand.

"Yes, we had to Hermione." She nodded tearfully and laid her head on his shoulder.

"She looks a lot like us doesn't she?" she whispered. Harry smiled softly.

"Yeah, she does." She had Harry's high cheekbones and from the shape of them she probably had his eyes also, she had Hermione's hair, nose, and mouth. She seemed smaller now, shorter than she was before and her skin had turned a lighter shade. Harry reached over and brushed a dark curl away from her soft face. They stayed with her all night as she slept, every once in a while her body would twitch. Hermione informed him that it was her muscles responding to the changes in her body.

The sun was starting to rise by the time they fell asleep, Harry leaning awkwardly against the headboard and Hermione curled around Catherine.

When Harry woke up Hermione was still sleeping but Catherine was no where to be found. With panic rising in his chest he slipped silently out of bed as not to disturb Hermione. He left the room and sprinted down the hallway and peeked into the library, not seeing her he jogged up to the second story of the room and looked around, when he saw she wasn't there either he ran out of the room. He went into his room and saw that the bathroom door was open and the light was on.

He sagged against the door frame in relief when he saw her standing there on a stool in front of the large mirror.

"Hey" he said softly, as to not startle her. She turned to him and he held back a gasp at the sight of his eye staring back at him.

“Hey Daddy.” She said with a tired smile. She turned back to her reflection. “I look different.” He walked further into the room and came to stand behind her.

“Yeah, you do.” She was a perfect blend of him and Hermione. Her dark curls flowed gently to the small of her back and peeking from under her pink pajama shorts were a pair of pale knobby knees. Her big emerald eyes stared at her reflection in amazement.

“I-I look pretty.” She said as she ran a delicate hand through her curls and a deep blush colored her cheeks. He smiled and kissed the top of her head.

“You’re beautiful.” She turned around and lifted her arms and he gladly picked her up.

“If you’re my Daddy does that mean Herm-Hermy is my Mommy now?” she asked. He shifted her to his hip and left the bathroom.

“Well, yes.” She nodded thoughtfully. When they walked back into the room Hermione was just waking up. When she saw Catherine she smiled brightly.

“Good morning you two!” she greeted them. Harry put the little girl down and she skipped over to the bed and climbed into Hermione’s lap. Hermione wrapped her arms loosely around her waist and peered into her face.

“Daddy says that now you’re my Mommy.” The child said. Hermione’s eye widened slightly and he could see tears beginning to form. She cleared her throat.

“Yes, I guess I am.” She said with a watery smile. Catherine leaned forward twined her arms tightly around Hermione, laying her head on her chest.

“Good.” She said simply. Hermione sniffed slightly and hugged the small girl. When they parted Catherine spoke again.

“Will my name be different? Will I still be Catherine Elise Meyer?” Harry sat next to them with a thoughtful expression.

"Well your last name will be Potter now, so you'll be Catherine Potter." She shifted and looked at him.

"So my name is Catherine Elise Potter?" she asked. When he nodded she smiled. "I like it." Hermione pushed the girl's long curly bangs from her eyes.

"I like it too." She said. She stood up, placing the child on the floor. "It's already afternoon! You need to go get dressed." She nudged the child towards her dresser then grabbed Harry's arm and began to pull him out of the room.

"You too mister." She teased as she pushed him into their bedroom.

"Yes Ma'm." he retorted. She rolled her eyes and smacked him on the arm. He grabbed a pair of blue jeans and a black button-up shirt out of the wardrobe and headed to the bathroom.

When he walked out of the bathroom Hermione was already dressed in a pair of light blue jeans and a deep purple sweater, sitting on their bed with a concentrated expression on her face.

"What's wrong 'Mi?" he asked. She bit her lip slightly then signaled him to sit next to her, when he did she turned to face him.

"I think I might know what the Ravenclaw Horcrux is." Harry reeled. He blinked in shock for a moment then cleared his throat.

"Err...What?" she rolled her eyes.

"Honestly! The Ravenclaw Horcrux. I was re-reading **Hogwarts: A History** when I came upon a passage about Rowena Ravenclaw." She picked up her wand and summoned the book, it flew from the bookshelf and into her hands. She quickly flipped to a marked page. ***"Shortly before the schism of the Hogwarts Four Rowena Ravenclaw received a chess set from Salazar Slytherin for her birthday. Both the board and the pieces were made completely in pure white Elvish marble and inlaid with gold. It was one of her most prized possessions."***

When the founders split Slytherin, in his rage, destroyed the beautiful set. It is said that only one piece of the chess set survived. The queen. The piece has never been found.” She closed the book and looked at him in satisfaction. “Not only was it a relic from Ravenclaw it also had the touch o Salazar Slytherin. It’s something Voldemort would definitely use.” Harry shook his head in wonder.

“Genius! When did you find this?!” she blushed slightly.

“While I was waiting for you to get Catherine out of bed for the potion.” He nodded. “Where do you think he hid it?” she asked. He pursed his lips and shrugged.

“I have no idea. We definitely need to get to muggle London.”

“And Diagon Alley.” Their door swung open and Catherine bounded in, her wild curls bouncing around her face. She was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a pale green peasant shirt. She was holding Hermione’s wand in her hand.

“I found this on my bed.” She said.

“Oh, that’s mine. Thanks Lovely” Hermione said reaching for it. The little girl pouted slightly and reluctantly handed it to her.

“When can I do magic?” she asked, pushing her curls from her face. Hermione waved her wand and the little girl’s hair was pulled into a thick braid.

“When you turn eleven and you go to Hogwarts.” Harry intoned. She sighed and leaned against the bed.

“*Why?* I bet I’m really good at it!” she whined. Hermione grinned then stood up, picking up the child.

“I bet you would be, we’ll just have to see when you’re eleven.” The little girl laid her head on Hermione’s shoulder and looked up at her, her bright green eyes becoming wide and she pouted a bit.

"*Please?*" she begged. Hermione smiled down at her puppy dog look and Harry laughed from the bed.

"No, love." She said firmly. The child sighed and dropped the subject though they knew it was only for now. Harry stood up and wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist. Harry looked at the two of them, the love that shone in Hermione's eyes when she looked at the child in her arms, the happiness that he saw when he looked at his daughter. It was perfect, *this* was how life was supposed to be.

"Ok, let's go have some breakfast." They left the room and chatting happily the family made their way to the dining room.

A/N: Sorry about the long wait y'all, I was having a bit of writer's block.

Anywho thank you all for reading and reviewing! Next chapter: Diagon Alley, Remus, and clues to the whereabouts of the Horcruxes.

Chapter 13

“Catherine Elise Potter get down here right now!” Hermione shouted up the stairs. They were on their way to Grimmauld place, then from there to Diagon Alley. Harry was lounging on the couch in the family room and Hermione was standing at the bottom of the stairs, they had been waiting for Catherine for at least twenty minutes.

“I can’t find my shoe!” she shouted down to Hermione. Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose then started up the stairs. A couple of minutes later she returned holding Catherine by the hand. The child was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a pale pink sweater, Hermione had pulled her hair back into a low ponytail and she was wearing both of her lime green sneakers.

“I don’t like this sweater” the little girl whined “It’s too pink.” Hermione sighed and drew her wand, she waved it over Catherine and the sweater changed to dark green.

“Thank you!” she said happily. Harry swung his long legs off of the couch and stood up. He was also wearing a pair of black trousers, a white t-shirt, a black high-collar pullover, and his favorite black leather messenger bag was swung over his shoulder. Hermione had followed their example and went with dark colors, a deep red t-shirt with a black blazer and a pair of low-rise black jeans.

“Found your shoe?” he asked.

“Yep! It was under my bed.” She said smiling brightly. Harry stepped over to the fireplace and took down the jar of floo powder.

“Do you remember what I said about flooing Kitty-Cat?”

“Yes, keep my eyes closed tight and don’t let go of Mommy.” She intoned.

“Good.” He turned to Hermione. “I’ll go first.” He grabbed a bit of the green powder then threw a pinch of it into the fire.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" The familiar feeling of spinning out of control overtook him. He squeezed his eyes shut, hoping to fool himself into believing he wasn't spinning. Soon he stopped and he flew out of the fireplace and onto a soft rug. *"I hate flooing."* He pulled himself off of the floor and flicked his wand over himself, vanishing the ashes from his clothing.

"Enjoy your trip?" a familiar female voice said from behind him. He turned to the doorway of the kitchen. A thin woman with a heart shaped face and bright gray eyes and pink hair which at the roots were a dark pink that slowly faded into a near white blonde at the tips.

"Tonks?" he asked with slight shock. She grinned and her eyes turned purple.

"The one and only." She stepped closer and hugged him. He returned it.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he released her.

"I've been helping Remus redecorate." She said, gesturing around the room. He noticed the changes for the first time. They had painted the walls a bright tan and the floor was now covered with a lush white carpet. A huge cushy tan couch with dark red, gold trimmed pillows sat in front of the fireplace and on the wall above the light stone fireplace were a collection of picture. Some of him and Remus when he was a baby, newer ones of them walking around the lake in third year, his parent's wedding picture and some from the man's school days. There were even a few of Remus and Tonks.

A red carpet sat on the stairs and ran the length of the hallway. He let out a low whistle.

"Wow, you guys did a great job." He said.

"Yeah, we even got rid of that damned portrait." His eyebrows shot up.

"Really? How'd you manage that?"

"Well, we did the only sensible thing. We blew the wall apart." She said with a smirk. He was laughing when the fire flared green and

Hermione stepped out with a dizzy looking Catherine in her arms. She smiled when she saw him, shifting the child to her hip. Tonks stared at the child in obvious shock.

“Err...Is there something you two haven’t been telling?” Harry rolled his eyes.

“You remember Catherine.” Tonks looked between Harry and Hermione then he eyes widened.

“Magical Adoption?!” she exclaimed. Hermione walked closer to them.

“Yes.” She said simply. Tonks shook her head then smiled.

“Well, wasn’t expecting that but I understand why you did it.” Hermione placed the little girl on the ground and she immediately latched onto her hand, staring up at Tonks in suspicion. The older woman kneeled so she was eye-level with the child. She closed her eyes tightly and her hair turned curly and bright pink and her eyes turned a matching pink. Catherine’s emerald eyes widened.

“How’d you do that?” she asked excitedly, her grip on Hermione’s had loosening slightly. Tonks grinned.

“It’s a special power I have.” She explained.

“Oh.” Hermione looked around the room curiously.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“Thanks, it took us a while but it was well worth it.”

“Where’s Remus?” Harry asked. The smile faded from her face.

“He’s upstairs right now, resting after his transformation.” She closed her eyes again and she returned to her previous state. “Would you like some tea before you go?” she asked. When they agreed she led them into the kitchen. The walls had been painted in white with a band of soft yellow at the top and the floors were a light wood. The cabinets were white with frosted glass. The counters surrounded the room and were done in white wood with pale yellow marble on top.

The wall behind the stove and sink was done in yellow and white tile. There was an island in the middle of the large room instead of the huge dining table with white and yellow wicker stools. They had added more windows and sunlight streamed into the bright room.

"How lovely!" Hermione exclaimed. Tonks grinned.

"I thought so. Remus and I fought over the yellow though" she laughed "He thought green was better but I was right." She flicked her wand and a tea pot flew out of one of the glass cabinets and she caught it. She once again flicked her wand and filled it with water. Hermione placed Catherine on one of the stools.

"Where are the cups?" she asked. Tonks gestured to one of the cabinets and Hermione promptly strode over to it and took out three yellow and white flowered tea cups and a small glass.

"Do you have any pumpkin juice for Cattie?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's in the pantry." Tonks waved her wand over the tea pot and it began to boil. Hermione pulled a pitcher out of the small closet and poured the cool sweet juice into the glass and handed it to the girl. She placed the cups on the table and Tonks carefully poured the tea into them. Harry picked up his cup and sipped the tea.

"Wow Tonks, we've been here ten minutes and you haven't broke or tripped over anything yet." He teased. She shot him a dirty look.

"I'm not *that* clumsy." She grumbled. Hermione snorted but hurriedly covered it by drinking her tea.

"Of course you aren't." he said, patting her hand. She, none too gently. Smacked him on the head.

"So what are you guys planning to do today?" she asked as she blew on her tea. Harry's eyes met Hermione's briefly.

"A bit of shopping." She answered with a non-committal shrug.

"Oh, getting your Hogwarts things?"

“Err...something like that.” He shifted in his chair. Tonks nodded.

“This is usually the time when people start getting their things; Diagon Alley is going to be crawling with students.” He shot Hermione an alarmed look. He hadn’t thought of that.

“I bet.” Hermione replied taking a large gulp of tea. The door to the kitchen swung open and an exhausted looking Remus limped in. He was wearing a pair of red pajama bottoms and a white shirt and his hair was sticking up in all kinds of directions. He blinked at them confusedly for a couple of second then he gave them a tired smile.

“Harry, Hermione” his eyebrows shot up “and Catherine.” The little girl grinned at him and his eyebrows rose higher at seeing Harry’s lopsided smile on her face.

“Hi Moony!” she exclaimed happily. He looked shocked; he had never heard her speak.

“Hello Cattie.” He sunk down in a stool next to Tonks who frowned slightly at him.

“I thought you were resting?” she asked. He rolled his eyes.

“I’m tired of resting, Dora.” He flicked his wand and a steaming cup of tea appeared in front of him. “It was terribly boring.” He muttered, sipping the drink. Harry was surprised she didn’t try to kill him for the nickname.

“Fine, don’t come crying to me when you pass out.” He smiled at her.

“If I’m passed out how will I come crying to you?”

“Well-you-shut up!” she said and he laughed. Harry watched them with a smile; it was nice to see Remus finally happy. They talked a bit more then Hermione reminded him they needed to be leaving soon. Remus and Tonks walked them to the door.

“You know you guys can come and visit anytime you like.” Remus reminded them, hugging them both. Tonks repeated the action.

“And we wouldn’t mind babysitting if you two, you know, want some time alone.” She said with a grin. They both flushed bright red.

“Err...Thanks.” Harry muttered. They walked out the door.

“Bye Tonks and Moony!” Catherine shouted before they closed the door. Harry balanced her on his hip and threaded his fingers through Hermione’s. They started down the sidewalk and to the alleyway Harry had found last time he was here. He handed Catherine to Hermione and pulled the shrunken bike out of his bag. After Hermione checked to make sure no one was around he placed it on the ground and tapped it with his wand. Once it was returned to its original size he opened the compartment and pulled out the helmets, handing them both to Hermione.

“You’re going to have to get another one Harry, or a car.” She said as she put Catherine on the ground and slipped the helmet onto her head.

“I’ll get another one.” He replied. He swung onto the bike and Hermione placed Catherine behind him.

“I think you should get a car, or a van.” She quipped. He stared at her in horror.

“A van?! Are you crazy?! That’ll ruin my reputation!” she snorted and put her helmet on, slipping behind the child. Still shaking his head he pulled out of the alley and sped down the street.

He was glad he wasn’t sharing a helmet with Hermione because she would surely be yelling at him; he had gotten them lost at least twice. Remus had assured him that the Leaky Cauldron wasn’t very far from Grimmauld Place; he had even jotted down some basic directions but that still didn’t stop Harry from driving in circles.

He sighed in relief when he spotted the familiar dodgy looking pub. He managed to find a parking space between two cars, he slid into it effortlessly. He climbed off of the bike, lifting Catherine off after him and taking the helmet off of her head. Hermione stepped off of the motorbike and also took off her helmet.

"Why were we driving in circles, Harry?" she asked her hands firmly on her hips. He smiled sheepishly.

"I might have got a *slight* bit lost." She shook her head at him and tucked the helmets into the compartment.

"A slight bit, sure." He rolled his eyes exaggeratedly and Catherine giggled. Someone cleared their throat behind them. They turned towards the sound. "*Crap.*" A muggle policeman was standing behind them, looking at them with a suspicious look on his face.

"Is this your bike?" he asked. Harry forced a casual smile onto his face.

"Yes it is." He answered. The man looked at the bike and then back into Harry's face, his expression becoming even more distrusting.

"May I see your license?" Harry felt panic rising in his chest and he could see Hermione biting her lip out of the corner of his eye.

"Of course, Officer." Not quite knowing what he was going to do he reached a shaky hand into his bag. "*Could I Obliviate him without anyone noticing? No, no way.*" His hand came in contact with his wallet.

Without knowing why he opened it and slid out his Gringott's bank card. A slight stinging went through his finger and the card changed before his eyes. He nearly sagged with relief. A new looking driver's license was in his hand. His name was printed neatly on it and a small picture of him was also on it. A bogus address was printed on it and the age clearly said '18'.

He handed the license to the man in front of him. The Officer's eyebrows shot up and he examined to card closely. After a long moment he handed it back to Harry.

"Thank you, have a nice day." He tipped his hat to them and strode away. As soon as he was out of earshot Hermione rounded on him.

"Where did you get that from?!" He grinned at her.

"It's my bank card, it just...changed!" He looked down at the card in his hands and wondered how he was supposed to change it back. There was another small sting in his fingers and the card returned to its original state. He grinned again. *"Well I guess that's how you do it."* He slid the card back into his wallet and put it in his pocket. Hermione picked up Catherine.

"Are you ready?" she asked her. The little girl nodded excitedly. She had been waiting for ages to *really* see the magical world. Harry took a deep breath and steeled himself for the battle ahead. The place was going to be crawling with students, his friends and classmates. They were going to be in for quite a shock. He met Hermione's eyes, she knew what he was thinking. She reached over and grabbed his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

He stood to full height and strode purposely towards the door. When they stepped inside the usual quite chatter of the Leaky Cauldron ceased.

The few wizards and witches that were in the dim pub stared at them in shock. Harry kept his face blank and he could see Hermione looking at everyone with a calm expression and a raised eyebrow. A slight frown was on Catherine's face.

"M- Mr. Potter?" Tom asked apprehensively from behind the counter. He didn't have to ask, Harry's scar stood out proudly on his forehead. When Harry gave a short nod the people in the pub broke into excited whispers. Tom smiled his gap toothed smile and beckoned him closer. He shook Harry's hand vigorously.

"It's been a long time! You've had everyone in a right tizzy." Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Really?" he asked blandly. The older man ignored his tone.

"It was in the Daily Prophet when you disappeared, most believed you were captured by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." Harry restrained himself from rolling his eyes at the name.

"Well as you can see I'm alive and well." Tom nodded and peered curiously behind him to where Hermione was standing with Catherine in her arms.

"You've been...busy." He said staring at the child. Harry pressed his lips together and Hermione walked proudly over to them.

"It's nice to see you again, Tom." She said. He smiled at her.

"It's nice to see you too Ms. Granger. Who's the little lady?" Catherine tucked her head into the nape of Hermione's neck. Before she could answer Harry placed a hand on the small of her back and began to lead her to the door.

"We'll see you later, Tom." The bartender simply nodded and began to wipe down the counter though his eyes and everyone else's still followed them out the door." *It's going to be a long day.*" Catherine lifted her head and looked at them with a small frown.

"Is that what we came to see?" she asked, wrinkling her nose. Harry grinned.

"No, that was sort of the...waiting room." The little girl nodded. Hermione pulled out her wand and tapped the familiar pattern on the bricks. The gateway fell open and Catherine gasped.

"Welcome to Diagon Alley, Cattie." Hermione said. They stepped through the barrier and it closed behind them. Catherine's head swiveled around, trying to take in every aspect of the humongous town. Without further ado Harry laced his fingers through Hermione's and they started forward.

People gave them stunned looks, more than a few of them ran into things while they tried to watch them and walk at the same time. Harry kept his head up, refusing to feel embarrassed or self-conscious. Hermione made sure to return the stares they got with glares which sent most people running. Catherine watched it all in confusion and slight fear, thinking that they were staring because of her. Harry turned to Hermione.

"Where do you want to go first?" he asked. She pursed her lips.

“Madam Malkin’s?” he suppressed a cringe. He hated shopping.

“Sure.” They veered towards the robe shop. When he pushed open the door Madame Malkin walked towards them with a piece of parchment in her hand.

“Hogwarts robes?” she asked without looking up from her parchment.

“No.” Hermione said. The witch’s eyes flicked up from her parchment and they suddenly widened.

“Mr. Potter!” she exclaimed. He fought back the urge to roll his eyes. “You’re back!”

“Yes.” He replied dryly. The woman flushed for a second.

“Is there- Is there anything I can help you with?” Hermione took pity on the flustered woman and offered her a small smile.

“Yes, I need a few everyday robes and do you sale robes for children?” she asked. For the first time the woman took notice of the child in Hermione’s arms and her eyes once again widened. She looked back and forth between Harry, Hermione, and Catherine.

“Err...yes, as a matter of fact we do.” She said, pointing to a collection of racks on the far side of the room.

“Thank you.” Hermione said, smiling politely. They left the woman and went over to the racks of colorful clothing. Hermione placed the child on the ground.

“Pick out anything you like.” Harry told her.

“Really?” she asked, a smile covering her face. When he nodded she began riffling through the robes, Hermione following suit. Seeing nowhere to sit Harry plopped down onto the floor.

Catherine pulled out a pair of dark purple dress robes with little gold twinkling stars on the bottom.

“Can I have this one?!” she asked excitedly.

"Anything you want." Harry said again. She grinned and handed it to him, he placed it in his lap.

After about fifteen minute of Hermione and Catherine going through the clothes they walked back to the other side of the store where the woman still was, pretending to hang up robes, Harry carrying a small stack of fabric. The woman turned to them with a smile.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

"Yes" Hermione said "Could you please fit these for my daughter?" Madame Malkin glanced in surprise at her but then nodded.

"Of course. Step onto the stool please." She said, directing the small child to the short stool. After giving a nervous glance to Hermione, who smiled reassuringly, she stepped onto the stool. The woman waved her wand and the measuring tape began to circle Catherine's body, measuring here and there, while the little girl giggled every time it touched her. Hermione turned to Harry.

"Could you stay with Cattie while I go pick out some robes?" he nodded.

"Of course." She gave him a small smiled then walked towards another side of the store. Harry sat in a chair in the corner so he could watch the child. She giggled again when the measuring tape began to measure her neckline.

"Please stop moving." The woman said. The little girl placed her hands on her hips and gave the lady a pointed look. Harry had to grin. He had seen the same look from Hermione.

"It tickles." She stated. The woman gave her a kind smile.

"I know but you need to stay still." Catherine pouted slightly but stopped moving. A few minutes later the door of the shop swung open.

Luna Lovegood wandered into the shop. She was wearing a long white skirt and a green t-shirt with a rainbow striped tank top over it and her Hogwarts robe thrown over her shoulders. Her dirty blonde

hair was half up in a messy bun and her wand was tucked into it. She had on her butterbeer cap necklace and several beaded necklaces were wrapped around her waist and arms. Her pale eyes turned to Harry.

"Oh, Hello Harry." She said dreamily. He couldn't help but grin. He liked Luna; she was one of the few people who were always honest. Even if she could be a bit...dotty she never wavered from her beliefs. "Back from your vacation?" she asked as she walked over to them.

"For a little while. How was yours? Find any Crumple-Horned Snorkacks?" she beamed.

"Yes! An entire herd! It was quite a sight."

"I bet it was." She turned her misty eyes to Catherine, who was staring at her in interest.

"I didn't know you and Hermione had a daughter." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Err...This is Catherine." She smiled her dreamy smile at the little girl.

"Nice to meet you Catherine, I'm Luna."

"Nice to meet you too, Luna." She answered politely. Luna turned to Madame Malkin.

"I need Hogwarts robes, please." The woman nodded.

"Of course dear, one second please." She turned back to Catherine and flicked her wand. The measuring tape stopped and flew back into her pocket, she consulted something on the parchment then flicked her wand at the pile of clothing they had picked out. They all flew into the air and every once in a while a part of them would flash red, when they finished their light show they all landed next to Harry's feet, folded neatly.

"There you are dear." She said, helping Catherine off of the stool. The little girl bounced over to him and Luna stepped onto the stool.

“Did you see that measuring tape Daddy?! It flew all by itself!” he smiled at the excited child and pulled her into his lap.

“I saw.” Hermione returned a few minutes later with a few robes in her arms. Her eyebrows shot up when she saw Luna.

“Hello Hermione.” The girl said in her misty voice.

“Hello Luna, having a good summer?” Hermione asked politely. She smiled vaguely.

“Yes, Daddy and I found an entire herd of Crumple-Horned Snorkacks!” Hermione pursed her lips.

“You know-”

“We really should be going.” Harry cut her off, he could already see Luna’s eyes narrowing. Hermione shot him a look but nodded. Madame Malkin left the measuring tape measuring Luna and walked with them over to the counter. After paying for their purchases the woman placed them in a small bag which must have been charmed as everything fit into it.

“Goodbye Harry, Hermione, and Catherine. It was nice seeing you.” Luna said. Harry gave her a genuine smile.

“Bye, it was nice seeing you too.” It really was nice to see her again. Hermione gave her a small smile and Catherine waved.

They left the robe shop and continued down the busy street, determinedly ignoring the whispers and stares of those around them. Catherine suddenly tugged his sleeve. He looked down at the child in his arms

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Can we go in there?!” she asked, pointing at a shop across the street. He squinted at the sign. **The Magical Toy Box**. It read. He looked back at little girl who had turned on her puppy dog look.

"Please, Daddy?" He could feel himself melting. He heard Hermione snort next to him.

"Of course, love." He said, smiling at her. Hermione shook her head.

"You two go ahead, I'm going to head over to Flourish & Blott's." Harry shifted the child to his other hip and frowned.

"By yourself?" she rolled her eyes.

"I can take care of myself, Harry."

"I know." He sighed. She smiled and shook her head again.

"How about we meet at Fortescue's in two hours?" he nodded reluctantly and she leaned over and kissed his cheek then Catherine's head.

"I'll see you in a little while." He watched her until she disappeared into the store then turned and walked towards the toy shop. As soon as he opened the door the sounds of children shrieking and laughing reached his ears. He placed Catherine on the floor and took her hand. The entire store was surrounded by a collection of tubes that bright blinking marble like things zipped through. The floor looked and felt exactly like grass and a yellow trail went all around and through the store. Children were running around, chasing balls that ran away from them, playing with stuffed toys that sung and danced and there was even a side of the room where they could finger paint on the walls. The paint was obviously magical as the pictures the children drew would dance and run across the wall. There were shelves and shelves of toys as far as the eye could see. Catherine was bouncing excitedly.

He allowed her to drag him down the yellow brick road (A/N: I couldn't resist!) and into an aisle full of stuffed animals. Surprisingly instead of one of the fluffy bears she grabbed a soft gold lion. When she touched the toy it purred, she squealed happily.

"Can I have this one?!"

“Sure!” how could he say no? Not only was it nearly impossible for him to deny her anything but it was a lion! What kind of Gryffindor would he be if he *didn't* buy it? She tucked the toy under her arm and grabbed his hand again.

They went up and down every aisle, picking up anything that tickled their fancy.

They picked up a set of gobstones, one of the magical balls which was a purple and blue that swirled together, a dress-up trunk for Catherine that had every kind of outfit that you could possibly imagine, a small collection of talking story books, a child's broom which would only hover a few feet off of the ground, a box of the magical paint and a set of magical figurines that Harry said were for Catherine but he had really bought for himself.

It had little dragons that flew and shot sparks from their mouths, wizards that would run back and forth and shoot sparks from tiny wands, and every magical creature known to man. He couldn't wait to get home and break it open.

“Let's get one of those!” Catherine exclaimed, pointing to what appeared to be a bright pink monkey. She skipped over to the display and picked one up. It immediately sprung out of her arms and onto the floor and began to dance. It placed its hand on its hips and began to hop around, shaking its bottom. Catherine squealed and began to dance along with it.

Her little hands were placed firmly on her small hips and she bounced around, shaking her bottom and giggling, her wild curls flying everywhere. He nearly collapsed in his laughter, he almost passed out when the monkey changed its dance to the cabbage-patch and Catherine followed. The poor child seemed to have inherited his dancing skill. He was shaking with silent laughter when the monkey finally stopped dancing. Catherine scooped him up and turned to the chuckling Harry.

“I like him!”

"I could tell." He said grinning. The walked over to the counter where a frazzled looking woman was standing, splattered in paint but with a large friendly smile on her face.

"Can I help...you?" her voiced squeaked at the end when she caught sight of Harry's scar. Ignoring her shell-shocked expression he dumped his armful of toys on the counter and took the monkey and the lion from Catherine, placing them next to the other playthings.

"Yes, could you please ring these up for me?" he asked politely. The woman didn't react for a second; she was too busy staring with wide eyes at Catherine. Getting a little irritated he stepped in front of his child, the woman's eye flew up to his face and he raised an eyebrow.

"Oh! Yes-yes, sir." She hurriedly tallied up the price, making sure not to stare at the man in front of her. She had expected him to look more like a kid, she didn't think he'd be that...gorgeous!

She placed everything in a small tie-dye bag. He handed her his card and she waved a wand over it then handed it back to him.

"Th-Thank you for shopping at The Magical Toy Box, have at nice day!" she said, flushing brightly. He gave her a small smile then handed the bag to Catherine and took her hand.

He picked her up when they stepped back onto the busy street as not to loose her in the milling crowd. He was thinking of going ahead and heading to Flourish & Blott's when he saw the Magical Menagerie down the street. Remembering that he needed to pick up some more owl treats for Hedwig he headed towards it, holding Catherine more firmly when he saw the way people continued to stare at them.

He strode into the store and winced at the incredible noise of the animals.

"May I help you sir?" a woman wearing heavy black glasses asked him.

"I'm just here for some treats for my owl." She nodded and pointed to the other side of the store. Nodding his thanks he walked over to the

shelf of owl treats. He lifted Catherine up so she could take it off of the shelf.

“Can I give one to Hedwig?” she asked. She was absolutely in love with the owl. She was partly the reason he was out of owl treats as every time she saw the bird she fed her at least three. Hedwig was always happy to see her.

“Not too many, she’s going to be so fat she won’t be able to fly!” the little girl giggled and he placed her on the floor. She was incredibly light but his arms were getting tired. He laced his fingers through hers and they went back to the counter where the woman was now reading a copy of “Witch Weekly.” She didn’t even glance up when he handed her the treats, when she told him the price he released Catherine’s hand and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. After getting his card back he turned to pick up the little girl but she was nowhere to be seen. He looked around the room, fear rising in his chest. He moved from the counter, *“She couldn’t have gone far! It’s a small store!”* he jogged over the other side of the store, praying silently that she was over there. His hand flew to his chest when he spotted her.

She was standing in front of a tank of snakes, staring down at them with a look of slight fear and disbelief on her face. Sending a silent thanks to heaven he walked over to her.

“Catherine.” Her eyes snapped from the snakes and to him. She knew he was angry when he used her full name. “What have I told you about disappearing like that?! You can’t walk away without telling me where you’re going! Understood?” she nodded shakily, her bottom lip trembling. His anger quickly dissipated and he knelt in front of her, pulling her into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry for yelling at you, you just scared me.” He felt her nod against his shoulder. He stood up with her in his arms and began to walk towards the door, Catherine gave another confused glance at the tank of snakes.

He was just about to open the door when a streak of gray flew by him.

“Come back here you stupid animal!” he looked up to see the woman chasing after the streak. Without thinking he reached down and

plucked the small ball of fur off of the ground. The woman stopped in front of him, her hands on her knees and panting.

"Thank-" she took a ragged breath "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He looked down at the struggling thing in his hand and raised an eyebrow. It was a tiny black kitten. It had huge shining silver eyes and its tail was tipped white. He readjusted his hold on it and it stopped struggling though it still managed to look defiant.

"Stupid Kneazle." The woman muttered, reaching for the animal. "I'll be glad to be rid of you." She grabbed it by the scruff of its neck and began to put it into a cage she had dropped at her feet. It began struggling again and clawed its way back up her arm and jumped off of her shoulder and onto Harry's. "Damn it!" she exclaimed. He looked at the animal on his shoulder. It sat regally on his shoulder and looked at the woman with a haughty expression. Catherine giggled and it tore its eyes from the woman and leaned over to the child, sniffing her. Catherine giggled again when its whiskers tickled her face. He looked at the animal then at the angry woman and grinned.

"How much is he?" he asked. She blinked at him a few times.

"One sickle." He nodded and pulled out his card again.

"I'll take him." Her eyebrows shot up but she took his card and waved her wand over it then handed it back. "You might as well hold on to it for a second, I'll need to get food and such."

"That's not necessary!" she flicked her wand and a bag of food, a small bowl, and a pillow flew from a shelf and in front of him. "Just take it! Just take him!" he shrugged and slipped his wallet back into his pocket. She shrunk the items and handed them to him and he dropped the tiny things into his bag. She practically pushed him out the door. Catherine beamed down at the animal in her arms.

Seeing that he still had another hour until they were to meet Hermione he decided to head over to Gringott's. Catherine stared in awe at the great white building.

“Where are we?” she asked, clutching the kneazle closer.

“Gringott’s. It’s a bank.” She nodded. They passed through the huge bronze doors then the silver ones. When they stepped into the lobby Catherine stared at the goblins in shock.

“Goblins!” she whispered excitedly in his ear.

“Where’d you hear about Goblins?” he asked. She shrugged.

“I read about them in **The Goblin Wars.**” He shook his head and went to stand in a long line in front of one of the counters.

“This is taking too long!” someone whined in front of them. His eyes widened and the color drained from his face. “*Damn it! Why are they here **now!**?*” Standing directly in front of them were the Weasleys. How had he not recognized them! He was getting ready to turn around and leave when Catherine spoke.

“What’s wrong Daddy?” she asked.

“Nothing sweetheart.” He spoke quietly but the head in front of him whipped around.

“Harry?!” Ginny exclaimed.

A/N: Well that one was shorter than usual but I wanted it to be a cliffie evil grin.

Hope y’all enjoyed reading it!

Chapter 14

"Harry?!" the rest of the Weasley clan turned around quickly. *"Shit! Can I run?!"* before he had a chance to escape he was pulled into a bone-crushing hug.

"Oh Harry! We were so worried!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed. He pried her arms from around him and Catherine.

"As you can see I'm fine." Her eyes widened at his cold tone. It was just her, Ginny and Ron. He was standing behind his mother and sister staring open-mouthed at the child in Harry's arms. He looked pretty much the same though he seemed to have grown another couple of inches.

"Who-Who is that, mate?" he asked. Harry held Catherine a bit closer.

"This is my daughter, Catherine." There was a shocked silence.

"Your-Your what?!" Mrs. Weasley's hand flew to her chest. "But...you're too young!" Harry rolled his eyes.

"Look, I have some things to attend to so..." he made to step around them but Mrs. Weasley grabbed his arm.

"Harry...what's wrong dear?" her eyes were concerned and she kept glancing at the child in his arms. He sighed inwardly.

"Wrong? I'm perfectly fine." Ron had taken his eyes off the child and was now looking Harry up and down, his eyes shining with jealousy.

"Nice outfit, Harry." Ginny said, her eyes trailing down his body. He shifted uncomfortably under her lustful gaze and suppressed a shudder. Sure she was pretty with her bright red wavy hair and soft brown eyes but...ew!

"Thanks." He mumbled. Mrs. Weasley gave Catherine, who was still clutching her pet, a warm smile.

"Hello there dear, I'm Molly." The little girl tucked her head into his shoulder and gave the older woman a small smile.

"Hi Molly." She said shyly. The woman looked closer at her, examining her features, then her eyes widened.

"Who's her mother?" she asked warily. His blood froze, was he supposed to tell her? He stood up straighter and looked her dead in the eyes.

"I think you know who her mother is." If possible her eyes became wider.

"Oh!" He stepped around them and began to stride towards the counter.

"Wait!" Ron shouted jogging over to him. He paused and raised an eyebrow at the boy. "Is that all you're going to say?!" he asked furiously. "You disappear for a month and then just strut back in and *ignore* me?!" Harry calmly placed Catherine on the ground then turned to his friend.

"Ignore you? If I remember correctly *you* were the one who didn't bother to write me." He gaped at him for a second.

"Because Dumbledore told us not to!" Harry rolled his eyes.

"Like we haven't ever disobeyed Dumbledore before!" He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, forcing himself to calm down. He didn't want to lose his temper in front of Catherine.

"What about Hermione?" he asked. Ron's face became confused and his ears turned red.

"What about her?" he stammered.

"Why didn't you write *her*?" The redhead's face was even more confused.

"How did you know-" His eyes widened. "You've talked to her?! Where is she?!"

"She's with me." He said calmly.

"With you?" his eyes drifted down to the little girl at their feet and they widened again. The color drained from his face and he glanced from the child and back to Harry. His mouth dropped open and he stood there in shock. Before he could say anything Harry picked his daughter back up and walked to the desk, Ron still staring in astonishment and horror at the spot that he once was.

Before the goblin could ask he slid his key across the counter, silently urging the goblin to hurry.

"The Potter vaults?" the goblin grumbled. He nodded sharply and the creature snapped his fingers. Another goblin popped next to him and beckoned Harry and the child to follow him. Without sparing a second glance in the direction of the Weasleys he followed the goblin through a small door.

"Who were those people, Daddy?" Catherine asked. He sighed and shook his head slightly.

"Just some old friends." The goblin directed them to one of the carts. He stepped into it, lifting Catherine in after him and settled her on his lap.

"Hold on real tight, Kitty-Cat!" She let out a mighty yell when the zoomed down into the tunnels. She shrieked and laughed through the entire ride.

"It's like a rollercoaster!" she shouted over the roaring wind. The ride took longer than usual; they were going deeper and deeper into the bowels of the bank.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a flare of flame. "*Dragons?!*" When they finally stopped he could tell by the coolness in the air that they were deep underground. He followed the goblin out of the cart with Catherine in his arms.

They were standing in front of a pair of huge stone doors. The goblin stepped forward and stroked the door. He nearly dropped Catherine when he saw the large room in front of them.

“The Potter Vaults.” The goblin said in his gravelly voice. Harry nodded his thanks and placed Catherine on the cool stone floor, taking her hand in his.

The vault looked more like a vast hall than anything else. Huge golden columns surrounded the large circular room. The walls were completely covered with shelves that were stocked full of small boxes and various nick-knacks. Various trunks were stacked on the floor and a pair of gold plated doors stood at the far end of the room.

“What’s behind that door?” he asked.

“Gold of course.” Another voice answered. He turned around, his hand already flying to his wand. He relaxed when he saw that it was Griphook. “Hello, Mr. Potter.”

“Hello, Griphook.” He replied. The goblin stepped farther into the vault.

“May I ask who this is?” he asked, looking at Catherine.

“This is my daughter Catherine.” The goblin nodded at her.

“It’s nice to meet you.” She said politely. Griphook followed them into the vault and stood with arms behind his back at the doors. Harry noticed the other goblin had disappeared. He and Catherine walked to one of the shelves and Harry absentmindedly grabbed a small wooden box off of the shelf.

He released his hold on Catherine’s hand and opened the tiny box. He let out a small gasp.

Inside the box was a set of rings. The first ring was a women’s ring. It was platinum with an old mine cut white diamond and the band was thin and braided. The second was a simple men’s wedding band, it was also platinum.

“Your grandparent’s wedding rings.” Griphook said from next to him. “They are part of a set with the **Cor Cordis Ab Munimen**.”

“**Cor Cordis Ab Munimen**?” Harry asked. The goblin nodded.

“Yes, the Heart of Protection. Your great, great, great grandfather had it and the rings forged for he and his wife to protect her and their unborn child. It forms a bond between the wearers. A bond, as you might’ve guessed, of protection. If one is hurt or in need the other will feel it.”

“Where is it?” The goblin gestured to a crystal box. Harry stretched an arm up and grabbed the palm sized case. He winced as he brought it down, it was heavier than he expected. Catherine watched curiously as he opened the heavy top. Recognition shot through him when he saw the familiar necklace nestled on soft gold velvet.

It had a braided platinum chain and a small heart-shaped diamond. Though it’s colors were different he *knew* it was the necklace he had seen his grandmother wearing in the picture *and* the one Caterina was wearing in the portrait.

“I’ve seen this before...in pictures but the colors were always different.” Griphook nodded again.

“It changes depending on the birthstone of the wearer.” He nodded.

“Can I take it with me?” The goblin’s eyebrows shot up.

“Of course Mr. Potter! They are yours.” He blushed slightly and slipped the case into his bag. He looked at the small box that was still in his hands. Should he take them? What would he do with them? An image of Hermione’s smiling face entered his mind. “*No! I couldn’t ask her...*” he looked at the rings again then before he could lose his resolve he shoved the box into his bag.

He picked up Catherine and then turned to the goblin, a curious expression on his face.

“Griphook, how did you know where the cottage was if it’s under the Fidelus?” The goblin once again raised his eyebrows.

“Didn’t you wonder why I was appointed your representative?” Harry shrugged, not seeing what it had to do with his question. Griphook sighed. “Every wizarding family has a goblin representative. They are rarely called on but we do wait in the wings in the event that we are

needed. I am the Potter family representative. I keep all the records on your family, I know about every one of your possessions and every one of your properties.” Catching Harry’s concerned look he gave him a smile, or what can be considered one. “No need to worry Mr. Potter, no one can get that information. The privacy and protection of our customers is guarded even more fiercely than our vaults.” They spoke for a few more minutes on the security of his information and when he was satisfied the goblin took him back to the cart and back to the door to the lobby. When the goblin popped away Harry readjusted his hold on Catherine.

“Ready to go meet Mommy?” she nodded happily.

“Yep!” He pushed open the door, peeking out to make sure the Weasley’s were gone. When he didn’t see them he let out a breath and walked out the door. He strode quickly through the cool marble lobby and out of the large golden doors. He checked his watch and sped up, they were late.

When he made it to Fortescue’s he spotted Hermione sitting at one of the outdoor tables. His eyebrows lifted when he saw that she wasn’t alone. Two girls, their backs to him, were sitting across from her. One had shoulder-length blonde hair and the other had black hair pulled back into a long braid. Hermione lifted her head, when she spotted them relief flooded her features and a large smile sprung onto his face. The two girls turned around and he had to suppress a wince. “*Lavender and Parvati.*” Hermione stood up as he made it to the table.

“There you are! I was starting to get worried.” She said as she leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Sorry about that. We ran into some...old friends.” He pulled a chair up to the table and placed Catherine in it.

“My, My Mr. Potter!” Lavender exclaimed, letting her eyes travel over his body, a small smirk on her face. “You *have* changed!”

“Indeed.” Parvati giggled and waggled her eyebrows. He rolled his eyes and fought down a blush. Hermione pressed her lips together.

“Parvati and Lavender were just leaving.” She said firmly.

"We *were* but now we have a reason to stay." Lavender still hadn't taken her eyes off of Harry who had slid a chair between Hermione and Catherine.

"Can I have some ice cream?" Catherine asked. Parvati's eyes shot to the little girl.

"Oh look at her! You're so cute!" she squealed. Catherine raised an eyebrow. "What's your name?" Catherine straightened her back and lifted her chin.

"Catherine Elise Potter." She said proudly.

"Potter?!" Lavender exclaimed. *"This is getting really old, really fast."*

"Yes, Potter." He sighed. "Don't you two have somewhere to be." He knew he was being rude but he was getting tired of people asking questions and staring at him and his family. The girls sniffed at his less than subtle dismissal and stood up from the table.

"Well, we can tell when we're not wanted." They flounced away, their noses high in the air. Hermione turned to him and grinned.

"Thank you! I was barely restraining myself from cursing them." After ordering their ice creams (Sundaes for Harry and Hermione and a triple chocolate mudslide for Catherine) Harry told Hermione about his meeting with the Weasley's. She listened with her lips pressed tightly together.

"Now he worries about me." She said bitterly. She shook her head. "I saw them walking by earlier. I ducked inside before they saw me."

"I had hoped we wouldn't have to deal with them for a while." He sighed. "I guess that it was inevitable." Hermione nodded and sighed then turned to Catherine and smiled.

"Where did you get the cat?" Catherine smiled brightly and licked some chocolate off of her face.

"Daddy bought him for me! He was trying to escape and the lady didn't want him so Daddy bought him." They talked about the rest of

their shopping as they finished their ice cream. Hermione informed him that she had found a book that he needed to see, that she'd show him when they got home.

When they had polished off their treats Hermione picked up the child and they left the shop. They continued chatting happily as they headed back to the Leaky Cauldron, his arm wrapped tightly around Hermione's waist and her's around his. Stuck in their own little world they were all completely oblivious to the stares once again directed at them.

Harry tapped the bricks and they stepped into the chilly little courtyard. For some reason he felt slightly...off. He glanced over to Hermione to see if she was feeling the same thing but she was still chatting happily with Catherine. Brushing it off he swung open the door to the pub and stopped short.

It was empty.

Now he definitely knew something was wrong. The Leaky Cauldron was *never* empty.

"We need to leave Hermione." He whispered urgently. She looked as uneasy as he felt. They turned to walk back out of the door when it slammed shut. Before you could blink they both had their wands at the ready and Catherine was shielded behind them.

"I'm afraid I can't allow that Mr. Potter." A calm voice said from in front of them. Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously and rage roared through his veins. *"What the hell is that old son-of-a-bitch doing here?!"*

"I'm afraid that that isn't your decision Dumbledore." His voice was calm but inside complete fury reigned. Hermione's hand clenched tighter around her wand and her eyes flashed with resentment. The ancient wizard sighed and stepped closer.

"I had a feeling you would make things difficult." Before they could think a powerful spell hit them both in the chest, sending them flying to opposite sides of the room. He heard Catherine scream just before he slammed into the wall.

There were several loud pops and Harry sprung to his feet, having every intention to run back to Hermione and Catherine. Strong arms grabbed him from behind before he could move.

“No!” Hermione screamed, she was being restrained by Snape and Hestia Jones had scooped a struggling and screaming Catherine into her arms and was beginning to carry her away from them.

Seeing the woman begin to take his child he elbowed whoever it was holding him in the stomach and sprinted after them.

Before he could get to them a spell hit him in the back and he fell, painfully, to the ground. He tried to move but it seemed like his body refused to comply. *“Body Bind! Damn it!”* Someone grabbed his shoulders and leaned him against the wall. From the corner of his eye he could see Snape none too gently place Hermione next to him. From the other corner of his eye he could see the small gray cat slink into his bag.

“I’m sorry this had to happen Harry.” Dumbledore had come to stand in front of them and behind him he could see Hestia trying to comfort the now sobbing Catherine who was still trying to claw her way out of the woman’s arms.

“You *will* be going back to the Dursley’s and Ms. Granger will be staying with the Weasley’s.” he glanced over to the struggling child. “We will find a good home for the child.”

“Daddy!” she sobbed. His heart broke with every tear that fell from her eyes.

Harry’s eyes narrowed and a familiar feeling began to fall over him. His ears began to ring, his vision took on a tinge of red and a rush of invigorating cold came over him. The feeling rushed back into his limbs and he stood up slowly.

Hestia paled and Mr. Weasley’s eyes widened. The power and anger radiating off of the boy was astounding.

“You forget your place old man.” He sneered. With a flick of his wand the Order member’s wands flew from their hands and landed at his

feet. "You are nothing more than my Headmaster. You have no right to interfere in my life or the life of my family." Dumbledore raised his bushy eyebrows.

"You are mistaken. My place is as your protector and I will do everything in my power to fulfill that duty."

"No Dumbledore. It is not your place, it is not your duty. If it was you've sure as hell failed at it." He waved his wand and the spell on Hermione was released. She stood up, shaking with rage. She turned to Hestia.

"Let. Go. Of. My. Daughter." She hissed coldly. The woman released the distraught child and she immediately ran over to Hermione who scooped her up. The child sobbed desperately into her shoulder.

"Dumbledore!" he heard Mrs. Weasley shout from the stairs. "What are you doing?! You didn't say you'd do this! You said you just needed to speak with them!" The ancient wizard didn't spare her a glance.

"Go back upstairs Molly." Ignoring him she continued down the stairs.

"You can't *force* Harry to go back to those...muggles" dislike flashed across her face. "And you surely can't take their child away from them!"

"She isn't *their* child. Her name is Catherine Meyer."

"Wrong again Dumbledore." Hermione said coldly. "Her name is Catherine *Potter*. She is now *our* child." He looked at the shaking little girl then between Harry and Hermione. His eyes narrowed.

"You did a magical adoption?" his voice sounded disappointed and angry. He knew that there was nothing he could do. Performing a magical adoption on a child was making them yours on every level possible. If he tried to take her away from them he would be on all accounts kidnapping a child from their family.

"We are going to walk out of this door Dumbledore." Harry's carefully composed voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "We are going to walk

out of this door and go home. If you even *try* to stop us I swear to god I will disappear. I will leave the wizarding world to fend for themselves.” Dumbledore plastered a condescending smile on his face.

“You wouldn’t do that Harry. You wouldn’t leave your friends, the people you love and who love you.” He raised his eyebrows at the old man.

“The people I love are either right here with me or already protected. The rest of the wizarding world can rot in hell for all I care.” He stepped closer. “*If* and when I defeat Voldermort it will be on *my* terms and no one else’s. If you push me old man I will forget the entire prophesy. I will disappear off the face of the earth.” They locked eyes. Each daring the other to challenge them.

Finally Dumbledore lowered his wand and gestured towards the door.

“Go on then Mr. Potter.” He said in a resigned voice. “It’s your decision.” He peered at Harry with disappointment in his eyes. He nearly laughed, there was a time when having the man look at him like that would have made him feel like the scum of the earth, completely ashamed and guilty. Not anymore.

Without hesitating he laced his fingers through Hermione’s and began to walk towards the door. Hestia stepped away from the door and Hermione turned the knob.

Before they left Harry turned back to Dumbledore and the few assembled Order members.

“If any of you *ever* come near my family again I will not hesitate to curse you to hell and back or I will kill you.” Leaving them in shocked silence he and his family left the pub.

They quickly pulled on their helmets and sped out of the parking space. He pushed the bike to it’s limit, wanting to put as much distance as possible between them and Dumbledore.

He skidded into the alleyway and jumped off of the bike. Hermione yanked off her helmet and slid off Catherine’s. Both their faces were

tear stained and Catherine had her arms wrapped tightly around herself. He pulled them into his arms, squeezing them close to him.

He had almost lost them. He had let his guard down and they were almost taken away from him.

"I'm so sorry." His whispered brokenly into Hermione's curls. He felt her shudder in his grasp.

"No. No it wasn't your fault." She said tearfully.

"I should've protected you." She shook her head.

"You did. If you hadn't I'd be with the Weasley's and Catherine would be locked up in some orphanage." He pulled little girl closer to him. They had to be more careful.

After another minute of two he released his girls. He shrunk his bike and slipped it into his pocket.

Hermione kept her arms wrapped firmly around the upset child, rubbing small circles on her back and whispering comforting words into her ears. He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to his side. They walked in silence to the large house, Harry constantly checking around them, he felt completely exposed.

He knocked quickly. It seemed to take hours before Tonks finally answered the door. She was flushed and her hair was different. Instead of the usual outrageous colors she usually had it was a shoulder-length white blonde, her bangs were feathered and reached just below her eyebrows. Her eyes were still gray but larger and surrounded by thick, light colored eyelashes. From the aristocratic arch of her nose and the highness of her cheekbones he could tell this was her natural appearance. He also understood why she didn't go around looking like herself; no one would ever take her seriously as she looked like a small porcelain doll.

"Wotcher! I didn't expect you back so...early. What happened?!" she asked anxiously as she ushered them inside, her bright eyes widening at their stressed and miserable expressions. She pushed them into the living room and onto the couch, getting even more

worried when she saw how scared Catherine was and how she refused to let go of either Harry or Hermione.

"I'll go get some tea, ok?" Tonks said. When she returned Remus (still in his pajamas) followed her in.

"Ok, what happened?" Harry took a deep breath and launched into the story, Hermione interjecting every once in a while. By the time they had finished the story Tonks had beaten one of the pillows from the couch to a pulp and Remus's face had turned a deep shade of red and he was gritting his teeth. Sometime during the tale Catherine had dropped off to sleep and Hermione had brought her and the kitten into one of the many guest rooms in the house.

"So you're saying that *Dumbledore*" Remus spat out the name like a curse "Tried to capture you and take Catherine away?!" Harry nodded grimly.

"*Son-of-a-bitch!*" Tonks suddenly exploded. They all jumped at the sound of her voice. "How the *hell* does he even think that he has *the right* to?!" she threw the pillow to the other side of the room. Remus leaned over and grabbed her hand, rubbing gentle circles with his thumbs.

"Calm down Tonks, you shouldn't be letting yourself get worked up. Not now." He gave her a meaningful. She nodded and took several calming breaths. Remus pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What do you two plan on doing?" he asked. Hermione sighed and shook her head.

"I think from now on we'll have to keep her out of the wizarding world. Out of places where Dumbledore has control." She said. Harry leaned back into the couch and ran a tired hand through his hair.

"Every time we start to enjoy ourselves, every time we try to be happy that old bastard goes and pulls something like this. It's like it never ends!" they sat in silence, everyone caught up in his or her own thoughts.

"Then we'll have to end it." Hermione said softly. "We need to finish this soon, Harry." He laced his fingers through her's.

"I know and we will."

"We're quitting the Order." Remus said softly. Tonks nodded in agreement.

"There's no way we can stay when he's using us for his own agendas. Not when he's doing things like this." She stood up from her chair and Remus popped up after her. "Are you guys hungry?" she asked. Harry thought about it for a second. He didn't really have much of an appetite but he knew that at least Catherine and Hermione had to eat; none of them had had more than ice cream since breakfast.

"I guess I could go for a bit of lunch." He replied. He stood up, helping Hermione up after him, and they followed the older couple into the kitchen. Tonks bounced over to the pantry and began going through it.

"So what are you guys hungry for?" Remus's eyes widened in horror.

"Err...maybe I should cook Tonks." She turned, hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Are you trying to say I can't cook?"

"Of course not, Dora." he spoke softly as if peaking to a child. "You *can* cook, you just shouldn't. Ever." She pointed a dainty finger at him.

"I'm going to remember that Remus Lupin." He just grinned and stepped around her and into the pantry, pushing her out.

"Now, what can I make for you guys?" Harry glanced at Hermione and she shrugged back.

"Anything is fine." He answered. Remus nodded and began pulling things out of the pantry.

"I'm going to go get Catherine." Hermione said, walking towards the kitchen door. When she disappeared through the door Tonks slid onto the stool across from him.

"How are you doing?" he shrugged.

"I'm fine; I just don't understand *why* Mrs. Weasley would call Dumbledore!" Remus turned around and leaned his back against the counter.

"You have to understand Harry, Dumbledore didn't tell anyone that you were ok. He let everyone come to there own conclusions. Molly was more than likely just letting him know that you were ok. I doubt she meant any harm." Harry dropped his eyes.

"I know she didn't." he shook his head "Dumbledore has too much control over them! Over everyone." Remus sighed heavily and turned back to the stove.

"He always has and I doubt he'll ever really loose it. Dumbledore isn't an evil man he has just had too much power for too long. It's gone to his head." Harry snorted.

"Understatement of the century." Hermione stepped through the door with Catherine in her arms. As soon as she saw Harry she released her death-grip on Hermione's shirt and reached for her Daddy. He gladly pulled her into his lap.

"Hey Kitty-Cat" he kissed her cheek "Enjoy your nap?" she nodded and leaned her head against his chest. "Are you hungry?" she shook her head. Hermione sat on the stool next to his.

"What are you making Remus?" she asked. He flicked his wand and five plates floated onto the table.

"Grilled Cheese." He shrugged. "It's my best dish." He flicked his wand again and the sandwiches floated onto the plates. He slid into a stool next to Tonks and bit into his sandwich. Tonks conjured a bowl of milk for the cat who fell upon it with vigor. They ate in comfortable silence though Catherine only picked at her food. Her face was forlorn and her eyes were downcast.

"I think we need to be getting home now." Harry sighed. Remus nodded and stood up, vanishing the plates.

"Yeah, you've all had a long day." They walked them to the fireplace. Tonks gave them hugs and kissed Catherine on the forehead.

"Don't worry about Dumbledore." She said "He won't try that again."

"I'm not too sure." Hermione sighed and readjusted her hold on Catherine. They said their goodbyes and she and the child flooded back to the cottage. Before he followed them Harry turned back to the two adults.

"Thanks for...you know." Remus pulled him into a hug.

"It's no problem cub. I told you before, you're family." Harry returned the hug.

"You're right, we are family." After another hug from Tonks he stepped into the flames and disappeared. The flames seemed more sinister than ever, he kept expecting a hand to fly in and grab him. *"Calm down Harry, you're freaking yourself out."*

He finally stopped spinning and he flew out of the fireplace and onto the cool wood floor of the family room. Hermione was standing next to the couch helping Catherine pull off her sweater, revealing a white shirt. She turned and gave him a tired smile.

"Do you mind helping Catherine get ready for bed?" Hermione asked tiredly. He shook his head and picked the quiet child up.

"No, you go on up to bed." She gave him a small smile and kissed him on the cheek. After making sure to give the little girl a few kisses on the face she headed up the stairs.

"Ready for bed, love?" he asked the small girl. She glanced up the stairs fearfully then looked back at him. His heart clenched painfully at the terrified look in her eyes.

"I-I'm scared." Her voice was small and shook slightly. He pulled her into a hug. *"And she was just starting to feel safe."*

"It's ok princess." He said into her hair. "You'll be alright." She nodded against his shoulder and sniffled gently.

He carried her up the stairs and into her bedroom. After she was picked out her bedclothes Harry helped her take the braid out of her hair.

Hermione walked into the room. Her hair was damp and loose and she was wearing baggy black pajama bottoms and a bright orange Chudley Cannon's tank-top. She grinned at seeing him combing the small child's hair.

"Hey." She said. Harry returned her smile as he undid the last strand of Catherine's hair.

"Hey Mi." she came and sat next to him on the bed and pushed the child's wild curls from her eyes.

"Feeling tired yet Cattie?" the little girl nodded. "Go take your bath, love."

"Ok." She picked up her pajamas and walked out of the room. As she walked out of the door Harry began pulling the shrunken purchases, Hermione peered curiously over his shoulder.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing at the colorful bag in his bag. He grinned and placed it on the bed.

"Toys!" he turned the bag upside-down and the playthings tumbled out. Her eyebrows shot up.

"I see you two enjoyed yourselves!" she said, picking up the monkey which promptly jumped out of her hands and onto the bed, beginning it's crazy little dance. Harry collapsed into laughter.

"It's cute but it isn't that funny, Harry."

"It's not the toy" he said between his giggles "It was Cattie. We were in the store and she saw it..." he told her the story as he began taking the bag of robes out of his leather bag. She laughed along with him when he described the dance; she was nearly in tears when he began to imitate it.

They talked about the highlights of the trip while they put away the toys and clothing, joking and laughing. Hermione paused in hanging up one of Catherine's new dress robes and turned to Harry who was placing a couple of sets of magical puzzles on a low shelf.

"Do you think we're spoiling her a bit?" she asked, a small smile on her face. He stood up from his crouch and looked around the room and the armfuls of stuffed animals, boxes of paint, dolls, the cat stretched lazily on the bed, and the magically enlarged wardrobe that was full of both magical and muggle clothing. He turned to Hermione and grinned.

"Yes, I think we are." She looked around the room and shrugged.

"She's a good kid; she deserves to be spoiled a bit." She closed the wardrobe door and bent down to see if there were more bags in Harry's. Her face became curious and she reached into the bag and pulled out the crystal case.

"What's this?" his eyes widened and panic rose in his chest. He sprinted towards her and yanked the box from her hands. She flinched in alarm.

"Nothing! Don't go through my bag!" She took a step back and a hurt look entered her eyes.

"Sorry." She said coldly. "*Idiot!*" he thought furiously. He reached for her arm and she stepped out of his reach.

"I'm-I'm sorry 'Mi! I didn't mean-" before he could finish his apology the door swung open and Catherine walked in.

She didn't seem to notice the tense atmosphere as she padded into the room.

"Hey sweetheart." Hermione said, forcing a smile onto her face. The little girl nodded and yawned. Hermione picked her up and carried her to her bed and placed her under the covers. The kitten instantly snuggled next to her. Harry came and sat on their other side.

“What are you going to name him?” he asked. She looked down at the gray cat that was now batting at one of Hermione’s curls and grinned.

“Trouble.” She stated. Hermione knocked him away.

“Fitting name.” she said. She leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her forehead. “Goodnight lovely.” She said softly.

“Goodnight, Mummy.” The child whispered. Harry tucked a stray curl behind her ear and tickled her side. She giggled slightly and he also placed a kiss on her head.

“Night princess.” He murmured to her and tucked the blankets closer to her body.

“Night Daddy.” They extinguished the lights, all except the one next to the bed and left the room.

As they walked towards their bedroom he could practically feel the coldness radiating off the young woman next to him. He opened his mouth to try to apologize again but one look at her face told him it would not be gladly received. He thought about the jewelry in his bag and winced again. *“Why didn’t I just leave it?”*

When they walked into the large room Hermione promptly headed over to the bed and slid under the covers, turning her back to him. He stood there for a few seconds, just watching her still and angry form. Finally he sighed and turned away from her, feeling angry with himself for snapping at her. He grabbed a random pair of pajamas and went to the bathroom to change, not even bothering to take a shower.

The room was dark when he walked back in and he stumbled blindly to the bed. The thought of casting a **Lumos** hadn’t even entered his mind. When he finally slid under the covers Hermione scooted closer to the edge of the bed, he could almost *hear* her furious thoughts.

He scooted closer and made to touch her shoulder. His hand hung a few inches over her, unsure if he should touch her,

"H-Hermione?" he whispered in the darkness. She didn't answer but he felt her stiffen. "Look Hermione, I'm sorry." He waited for her to reply but she didn't. He sighed and backed away. "*Bloody hell! I screwed up.*" He wasn't good at all this relationship stuff; he didn't know what to say to her! He watched her for a second, wishing she'd just roll over and smile at him, say that all was forgiven. Her curls fell into her face and spilled onto the pillows.

"*I'll get her to talk to me.*" He thought with a smirk. He scooted closer to her and ran a hand lightly up her side, his smirk widened when he felt her shiver. His hand continued its journey upward until it came to her shoulder, he reached up higher and brushed the hair from the nape of her neck, he felt her start with surprise.

He pressed his lips to her shoulder and began trailing soft kisses up to her neck, to behind her ear, her cheek, her jaw. She shifted closer to his until her back was pressed against his chest.

Finally he leaned forward and pressed his lips to her's. She gasped in surprise and he let his tongue slip into her mouth. She moaned slightly and arched against him. He smirked into the kiss and turned over so that he was on top of her.

His hands fell to her waist and he felt her soft hands slip under his shirt and her fingernails rake against his chest. He groaned and pressed himself closer to her. Soon he forced himself to tear his lips from her.

"Forgive me?" he asked breathlessly, peering down into her flushed face. She blinked looking dazed.

"What?" she asked in confusion. He grinned and rolled onto his back, taking Hermione with him. She straddled his waist and pouted down at him. "That wasn't fair Harry! You tricked me, kissing me like that! I was fully ready to give you the silent treatment."

"You wouldn't do that." He said with a smirk. She raised a cool eyebrow.

"And why wouldn't I?"

"Well, One:" he said, lifting a finger. "I'm cute. Two: I'm an amazing kisser. And three: You love me." She grinned and slapped him on the chest.

"Stupid ass." She said lovingly. He gave her an affectionate smile and grabbed her 'round the waist.

"I'm sorry for snapping at you 'Mi." he said seriously. She shook her head.

"It's alright Harry; I shouldn't have been going through your things."

"It's not alright, love. I overreacted." She rolled her eyes and leaned over so their faces were inches apart, her hair created a curtain around them.

"Let's just agree that we both made a mistake, okay?" when he nodded she kissed him softly on the lips. She sat back up and rolled off of him.

"**Lumos.**" She said and the light instantly came on. He squinted at the sudden light and sat up.

"What are you doing 'Mi?" she grinned at him then reached under her pillow.

"Do you remember when we were at Fortescue's and I told you I found an interesting book in Flourish & Blott's?" when he nodded she pulled a small book from under her pillow. It was black and covered in what he guessed by the design was snake skin. On the cover, written in large curvy letters was a name that made him flinch and gasp in surprise. **Salazar Slytherin.** Hermione was smiling happily at his shell-shocked expression.

"Do you know what this is Harry?! The diary of *Salazar Slytherin!*" he swallowed thickly and took the book from her hands.

"Why...Why did you *buy* this?!" she rolled her eyes and sighed exasperatedly.

"I bought it because it will help us tremendously on the hunt for the Horcruxes." She said in a 'duh' voice. He blushed slightly. "The only problem is I can't read it. It's written in some weird language, it's like nothing I've seen before." Her voice had begun to sound awed. He flipped the book open and frowned slightly, what was she talking about? It made perfect sense to him.

"Makes sense to me Hermione, maybe you're the one who needs glasses." Her eyes suddenly lit up.

"Read it to me!" She said, excitedly. Giving her a confused look he shrugged and did just that.

'That blasted Godric Gryffindor set my hair on fire during breakfast-' he stopped when he heard Hermione squeal.

"I knew it!"

"What?"

"Parsel-Tongue! You're speaking parsel-tongue!"

"I was?"

"Yes! It must be written in parsel-tongue." He looked down at the book in his hands in slight awe.

"Wicked." She yanked the book out of his hands.

"This will definitely give us clues to where the locket is or at least what it looks like." He nodded thoughtfully.

"How is it that you keep finding these things?"

"Research." She said simply. He winced; he really should have been trying harder to find out where the Horcruxes were. Sure the training was necessary but he'd still been lazing about. A determined expression crossed his face.

"We need to get to muggle London." She pushed a stray strand of hair out of her face and nodded.

"I was hoping we'd have been able to do it today but after what happened...it didn't seem like such a good idea."

"When we do go we *cannot* bring Cattie with us." He said firmly. She sighed.

"I know but we can't leave her here."

"We might have to take Remus and Tonks up on their offer." Hermione grinned at the mention of the older couple.

"Did you notice something different about Tonks?" she asked.

"Other than the fact that she actually looked halfway normal?" she punched him playfully in the arm.

"Not just that! Something about her was just...different."

"Yeah, I did notice but I can't quite place it." He looked at her mischievous expression suspiciously. "But you have an idea?"

"A suspicion." She said shrugging. He opened his mouth to ask her what it was when there was a timid knock on their door. Throwing him a curious look Hermione slid off of the bed and walked to the door.

Catherine stood in the doorway, her big green eyes full of unshed tears. She looked smaller than ever in her long white nightgown, her tiny feet peeking from under it, her dark curls tumbling softly down her back, her bear under one arm and Trouble at her feet.

"Can-Can I sleep with you?" she asked brokenly. Without answering Hermione scooped her up into her arms and brought her into the room, waiting for the cat to trot in and kicking the door closed behind them.

Harry wordlessly pulled back the covers and Hermione placed the child onto the bed and slid in next to her.

"**Nox**" Harry said softly and the lights were extinguished. He slipped into the warm bed on the other side of Catherine so she was nestled between them. He kissed her soft forehead; he could see her bright

eyes already slipping closed. Hermione squeezed his hand and brushed a hand through the small girl's hair.

"Goodnight." He whispered.

"Goodnight, love." He heard Hermione whisper in the darkness.

After a couple of hours he heard Hermione's breathing even out and he snuggled deeper under the covers.

He sent a silent prayer to keep them safe, that one day his daughter would no longer have to be afraid. He prayed that he'd be able to protect them, that they'd end this soon. After kissing Catherine's forehead again he allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

A/N: Ehh...that ending could have been better. Anywho sorry y'all about the long wait until update (hey I rhymed!) but I was beginning to lose interest in the story but no worries! I wrote out the parts with the Horcruxes and I'm super excited! Lol. I know the confrontation with the Weasley's was short but not to worry! It was the first of many and there will be some tough conversations.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 15

"I promise you're going to have fun." Harry said. Catherine pouted and threw herself back on the bed, pulling the hood of her white hoodie over her face. Her blue jeaned legs were hanging off of the side of the bed and she was fiddling with the hem of the red and pink plaid skirt she wore over them. Her red and pink flowered rain boots were kicking one of the posts restlessly.

"But I don't want to!" she whined. They were getting ready to take Catherine to Remus and Tonks's. He and Hermione were going into muggle London to try and find the orphanage that Tom Riddle grew up in and Catherine was not at all happy about them leaving her.

"Why can't I come?" he sighed and flicked his wand, a black hoodie flew from the wardrobe.

Since Dumbledore's 'ambush' Harry had actually managed to master non-verbal spells. After Hermione told him that he had done it to release her from the spell he'd been able to focus on the feelings he had while casting it. Remus was right, it was hard but it was also damn useful.

"I told you already Cattie, your Mum and I have some very important things to do and it's too dangerous for you to come with us."

"What about Trouble?" she asked, pointing to the small gray cat cleaning his paws contently on a chair in front of the fire.

"Trouble will be fine Cattie. DeeDi will take care of him if he needs anything." He replied. She sighed dramatically and slid off the bed and onto the floor.

"But I want to come." She mumbled into the shaggy rug. Hermione finished tying her white sneakers and leaned over the side of the bed, lifting the small girl to her feet.

"Sorry, love but you don't always get what you want." The child pouted again but sat back on the bed, chewing on the end of one of her pigtails.

"How long will you be gone?" Hermione smiled and pulled a black and white striped pullover over her head.

"Not too long, just a few hours. You won't even notice we're gone, you'll have a lot of fun with Tonks and Moony." She said, tucking a small leather bag into her pocket.

"What's that?" Harry asked curiously. She blushed and smiled sheepishly.

"Veritaserum" his eyebrows shot up. "We might need it!"

"Couldn't hurt." He shrugged. After Harry put off his trainers and they walked down the stairs and into the family room. Hermione slipped a small pink backpack, which held some of the child's toys, over Catherine's shoulders and Harry scooped her into his arms and grabbed a pinch of floo powder.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" Catherine buried her face in his shoulder as they spun through the bright green flames. They tumbled rather ungracefully out of the fireplace and straight into Remus's legs.

"Good morning!" He grabbed Harry's arms and pulled him to his feet. He set the little girl down and Remus knelt down so he was eye to eye with her. "Hey little miss, ready to have some fun?" she shrugged sulkily and leaned against Harry's leg, her arms wrapped tightly around it.

"I like your outfit." He said. Catherine smiled happily. Hermione had let her pick out her clothing that morning.

The fire flared green again and Hermione stepped gracefully out of the fireplace. She gave the older man a friendly smile.

"Hey Remus, where's Tonks?" he gestured towards the stairs.

"Bathroom. She hasn't been feeling too well lately." Curiously his smile widened when he said that. Hermione frowned slightly in the direction of the stairs.

"I hope she feels better." Remus nodded his thanks.

"Do you two want some tea before you go?" Harry shook his head.

"No, we really should be leaving now." He detangled Catherine's small arms from around his leg and crouched.

"We'll see you in a few hours, ok?" she nodded and tears began to fill her emerald eyes. He pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead.

"I love you."

"Love you too, Daddy." When he released her Hermione picked her up and gave her a mighty squeeze.

"You be good for Moony and Tonks, ok lovely?"

"I will."

"Love you." She said, touching her nose to the child's. She giggled and rub her nose against Hermione's.

"Love you too." She placed her back on the ground. "Thanks for watching her, Remus." He shrugged.

"No problem, we love Cattie." The little girl blushed slightly but smiled up at the man. Soft footsteps were heard on the stairs, Tonks was walking down them. She was wearing a pair of sweats and her hair was pulled into a messy bun.

"Hey, when'd you guys get here?" she said, a slightly tired smile on her pale face. Remus rushed to her side and helped her the rest of the way down the stairs, she rolled her eyes at them and Hermione stifled a giggle.

"We just got here and we were just about to leave." Hermione said. Tonks nodded and grinned down at Catherine.

"Hey Cattie! I was waiting for you to come." She jerked a thumb in Remus's direction. "He's such a boy, I was getting bored!" Catherine giggled when Remus stuck his tongue out at her.

They each gave the little girl another kiss and hugs for Remus and Tonks then left the warm house. Hermione threaded her fingers through Harry's as they walked down the sidewalk and he couldn't help but grin. He loved Catherine to death but it felt good to just be with Hermione.

"So, do you have any idea on which orphanage it is?" She furrowed her brows.

"Not really, we'll have to call around." He stopped.

"Call around?!" he asked incredulously. "Do you know how many orphanages there are in London?!" She rolled her eyes.

"Yes Harry, but we do know a few things to narrow it down a bit." They started walking again, heading towards the familiar alleyway. "One: It was a Catholic orphanage and Two: His mother died after giving birth to him in 1926 on New Year's Eve. All we have to do is ask about the child and the mother and I'm sure someone would've remembered him." Harry nodded thoughtfully.

They walked into the alleyway and while Hermione kept watch he pulled the shrunken bike from his bag and placed it on the ground, quickly tapping it with his wand and resizing it.

Hermione pulled the helmets out of the compartment and handed one to Harry. He slipped it onto his head and swung onto the bike, Hermione getting on after him.

"Where are we heading?" he asked. He flinched in surprise when her voice sounded in the helmet.

"I was thinking we'd go to a payphone and start making calls."

"Alright, hold on!" Once she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist he peeled out of the alley and sped down the street.

He zipped through traffic trying to find a phone kiosk that was in a reasonably private space. He spotted one behind a Starbucks and pulled behind the building. He parked next to the booth and they swung off of the motorbike.

“Do they have a phonebook?” he asked as she stepped inside. She lifted the book and showed it to him then pulled out a notebook and handed it to him.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“We need to make a list of the orphanages we pick.” She handed him the phonebook and a sparkly pink pen.

They waded through the book, picking out any that sounded even slightly possible. When they finished composing the rather long list Hermione picked up the receiver and Harry sat on the ground and leaned against the booth. He knew he was going to be in for a long wait.

“Hello, my name is Clarisse Hughes and I’m a writer for the National Children’s League magazine.” She said their hastily made cover story. “I’m doing a report on orphanages in the 1920’s and ‘30’s.” she lied sweetly. She paused for a second.

“Thank you. I was wondering if there was ever a child by the name of ‘Tom Marvolo Riddle’ living there between 1926 and 1945.” There was another pause as the person on the other end replied.

“No? Well thank you for your time.” She hung up the phone. “You can cross off St. Mary’s.” he nodded and complied. She picked up the phone again and dialed the next number on the list. She went through the same speech as before and after a couple of minutes she hung up the phone.

“No dice.”

“I guessed as much.” He muttered and crossed it off of the list. Things went on like that for another half an hour and Harry switched with Hermione. He dialed the next number on the list, praying silently that this would finally be the right one.

“Hello?” a pleasant voice said from the other end.

“Hello, my name is Joshua Clayborn and I’m a writer for the National Children’s League magazine. I’m doing a report on orphanages in the

1920's and '30's. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" the words slipped out of his mouth smoothly.

"Really?" the voice asked, sounding slightly confused. "I guess it wouldn't hurt to answer a few questions."

"Thank you. I was wondering if there was ever a child by the name of 'Tom Marvolo Riddle' living there between 1926 and 1945." There was a silence on the other end.

"Yes-Yes there was." The woman said, a slight tremor in her voice. Excitement rushed through him and he looked over at Hermione excitedly. She jumped up from the ground and slid next to him, leaning in close so she could hear the voice on the other side. "I'm-I'm not really comfortable having this conversation over the phone, could you by any chance come to the orphanage?"

"Of course! We can be there in twenty minutes." The woman rattled off directions that Hermione quickly jotted down in the notebook.

"Thank you, we'll be there soon." After hanging up the phone they sprinted out of the booth and back to the bike, barely pausing to pull on their helmets.

Hermione whispered directions to him through the helmets and in no time they were pulling up in front of a run-down looking church he cut the engine and they stepped off of the bike.

'Saint Joseph's Home for Orphaned Children.' He looked around at the age worn square building in front of them, the barren land on the side full of rusty play equipment and surrounded by a high iron gate. The sidewalk leading to the arched doors was cracked and weeds peeked in between them. He frowned. *"Not a very cheery place, is it?"*

"Doesn't seem like a happy place for kids to grow up." Hermione said softly from next to him. He nodded and squeezed her hand.

They walked up the stairs and Hermione reached up and knocked an old rusty knocker. There was silence for a few moments then they

heard someone's quick footsteps. The door swung open with a creak and a young nun poked her head out.

"Are you the two reporters?" she asked softly.

"Yes, we are." She nodded and pulled the door open the rest of the way, quickly ushering them inside. They were in a dimly lit hallway, the walls were a dingy off-white and the floor was tiled in black and white. Though everything looked thoroughly worn it was also spotlessly clean.

"Sister Thomas is right this way." She said gesturing down the hallway, her soft voice echoing. Harry frowned again, the entire place was eerily silent. There were no sounds or signs of any children.

She led them down the narrow walkway and to a wooden door and she knocked gently on it.

"Come in." a tired voice said from within. She turned the heavy knob and pushed on the door. She smile sheepishly when it didn't budge and turned the knob again, slamming her shoulder against the door. The door creaked open with difficulty.

An old woman in a habit was standing in front of a dirty window looking out at the empty play yard; she turned around when the door opened.

"I see you've made it safely." Her voice was gravelly and her dark brown eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're kind of young to be reporters, aren't you?" she asked. Harry plastered his most charming smile on his face.

"Yes, I guess we are. We're actually only interns, this is our first assignment." She peered into his face, lips pursed, for a few uncomfortable seconds then nodded once and gestured towards the two wooden chairs in front of her desk. Once they had taken their seats she turned to the young nun who stood next to the door, ringing her hands nervously.

"Could you please make us some tea, Emily?" After giving them a nervous glance she nodded quickly and left the room, closing the

door behind her. The old woman folded her hands on top of the desk and peered at them, she strongly reminded him of Madame Hooch.

"Now, what did you want to know about Tom Riddle?" she asked, her voice shook slightly as she said the name.

Hermione cleared her throat and sat up straighter in her chair and pulled out the notebook.

"How did he come to be here?" she asked.

"Well he was born here about the same time I arrived. I was just a baby at the time but from what I've had heard from the sister's before me his mother came stumbling in on New Year's Eve in labor. She was alone and filthy. She was already far along in the labor and it didn't seem like she'd have the strength to go along with the birth but she did. It was a long and difficult labor but she managed to give birth to the child but she had lost too much blood and she was dying. With her last breath she named him Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Do you know how he was as a child?" Harry asked. What little color that was left in the woman's face drained.

"Oh yes, I unfortunately do." She shivered and rubbed her arms as if the room had suddenly dropped in temperature. "I slept right across the hall from him." She stood up quickly and walked back to the window. "He was...strange." There was a soft knock on the door.

"Come in, Emily." After what they could guess was another struggle with the door Emily walked through the door, balancing a tray with a tarnished silver tea set and a tin of biscuits. Harry jumped from his chair and took the tipsy tray from her hand.

"Thank you." She said, blushing slightly. He gave her a small smile and placed the tray on the desk, she put the tin next to it and turned her sky blue eyes to the older woman.

"You may go." Sister Thomas said with a kind smile. Emily returned the smile and bowed out of the room. After asking them what they'd like in their tea she poured them each a cup. The warm drink seemed to pull the color back to her cheeks.

“Where were we?”

“You were saying that Mr. Riddle was a strange child.” Hermione volunteered. The sister nodded and settled back into the chair, her eyes taking on a glazed and faraway look.

“He was always quite and reserved but not exactly shy...he was cold.” She took another long drink of her tea. “He was also extremely intelligent, it was almost frightening.” An almost amused expression crossed her face. “I used to be so afraid of him I convinced myself that he had magical powers.” She chuckled and they forced laughter. “I remember once we were outside and I swear I saw him speaking to a garden snake. I even believed that I saw him levitate a book right off of a shelf.” She laughed heartily, nearly choking on her tea. The smile slipped off of her face. “But I wasn’t the only one that was afraid of him...I remember once a year they’d take us to the seaside. Tom took two other children, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop into a cave, I remember thinking it was strange that he’d go anywhere with them as they had been teasing him.” She shook her head. “I guess I should have known. When they returned...I can’t explain it...they looked...haunted I guess would be the correct word and they were never quite right afterwards, they almost never spoke. All they would say was that he had taken them ‘exploring’.” Her eyes became angry. “I’ve always believed that God could save anyone, that everyone deserved to be forgiven but Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle was a truly evil person. He was cruel, he had an absolute need to be in control, he had a complete disregard of others and he had absolutely no morals! He would go out of his way to cause pain, for no more reason than just for his enjoyment.” Her voice became angrier and angrier as she went on. “I remember he once broke one of the younger children’s hand simply because she had touched a toy he had deemed ‘his’. He ‘accidentally’ pushed me down the stairs when I had bumped into the dinner table and knocked his porridge on the floor, or when he hung poor Billy Strubbs’s rabbit from the rafters. Everyone was afraid of him, even the Mrs. Cole and the priest; they never tried to discipline him when he hurt another child. They were all too afraid that he’d somehow harm them. Thank god he was accepted at that boarding school for the gifted.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I apologize for my outburst. Thinking of him brings back a lot of bad

memories of my childhood.” She reached over and picked up the tin of biscuits and popped it open.

“It’s quite alright, we understand.” Hermione said, smiling kindly. Harry also smiled and accepted one of the cookies. He bit into it and had to suppress a wince, there were hard as rocks. *“Did I just chip a tooth?”* The woman blushed, embarrassed, when she saw his expression.

“I’m sorry about the dismal snacks, we’ve been a little short on funds lately.” She sighed.

“It’s quite alright, sister.” Harry said. Sister Thomas smiled and took another sip of her rapidly cooling tea.

“Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

“Yes.” Hermione began. “Do you know anything else about this ‘gifted’ school he attended?” The woman pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“Not really, all I know is that its name was **‘The Howard School for Gifted Boys.’**” She shook her head again. “After he began attending he became *worse*. I don’t know what happened but he somehow began to have almost complete control over the adults and most of the children, I don’t know how he managed it but they would follow his commands without question. He could snap his fingers and they’d just fall at his feet.” After taking a sip of his lukewarm tea Harry asked another question.

“Do you know what happened to Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop?” the old woman sighed heavily.

“Amy died a little after her eighteenth birthday from a bad case of the flu and as for Denny he was adopted a few months after the incident.”

As soon as she finished the sentence the sound of a church bell began ringing. She rose quickly to her feet.

“Goodness! It’s time for prayers, I can’t believe I lost track of time.” They stood up. “I’m sorry but I’ll have to cut this interview short.”

"It's alright, we should be going." They shook her hand and she opened the door. She was leading them to the door when what seemed like a flood of small children ran through the hallway. They were all wearing little school uniforms (plaid skirts, trousers, and vests.) and they were all very small. A little boy stopped in front of them and peered up at the two teenagers.

"Who are you?" Another nun reached over and boxed his ear.

"Don't be rude!" she said sharply. Harry almost sneered at the woman, she was too much like Aunt Petunia. The child's bottom lip quivered and hurriedly turned and he followed the rest of the children down the hall and to a set of large arched doors. Sister Thomas shook her head but opened the door.

"It was nice to meet you both." She said kindly.

"It was nice to meet you, thank you for answering our questions."

"It was no problem at all dears." After another wave she closed the door behind them and they headed down the stone steps and down the sidewalk.

"So Voldermort was always evil?" Harry stated. "You'd think they'd have kept him out of Hogwarts after learning he was an obvious nut." He pulled their helmets out of the compartment.

"Well they couldn't have kept him out, there wasn't exactly any *proof* that he was a 'nut' as you so eloquently put it." He rolled his eyes and handed her one of the helmets. He heard her stomach growl and he smirked.

"Want to go get something to eat?" she blushed a bit and nodded. They got onto the bike and pulled into the busy street.

They drove for a few minutes until Hermione told him to stop, pointing to a brightly lit restaurant on the other side of the road. He slowed down and pulled into the small parking lot, he parked under the shade of a leafy tree and got off of the bike, Hermione after him.

Hand in hand they strode up the sidewalk and to the green glass doors, when Harry pulled it open they were met with the sound of tinkling glass and gentle voices. He had to admit, she picked a pretty good place.

The entire room was decorated with climbing rose bushes and warm light filtered through hanging lanterns. The restaurant wasn't very full so it was reasonably quiet.

They walked up to a hostess who stood behind a narrow desk.

"May I help you?" she asked, a cheerful smile on her face.

"Table for two, please." Hermione responded. The woman nodded and looked down at a book on the desk.

"Name?" Hermione bit her lip and shot a glance to Harry.

"Err...well we don't actually have a reservation..." The woman's smile became a bit less genuine.

"Oh, well I'm sorry but we're reservation only." Hermione gave her a polite smile.

"Ok, thank you for your time." She began to pull Harry towards the door when he had an idea. He stopped walking and Hermione looked back at him curiously.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Don't be mad." He whispered then released her hand, walking back to the hostess. He could see Hermione's confused expression out the corner of his eye. *"I can't believe I'm doing this."* He leaned against the desk and smiled his most charming smile, his head tilted ever so slightly.

"Excuse me?" he asked, inwardly surprised at the smoothness of his voice. She looked up from the book and a blush instantly colored her cheeks.

"Y-Yes?" she asked rather breathlessly.

"I know that we don't have a reservation but I've had a very long day and I need a rest." He leaned closer, peering at her through his eyelashes. "Would it really hurt to make an exception? Just this once?" she swallowed thickly and her eyes flashed from his eyes to his lips. She ran a shaky hand over her tight black ponytail.

"I-I guess it wouldn't hurt too much." She stepped, shakily, from behind the desk and with unsteady feet gestured towards the dining room.

"Thank you." He smiled his lop-sided grin, completing his girl-killing combination. She blushed brightly and nodded. He turned to where Hermione was still standing, her mouth wide open, and beckoned her towards them. She walked over to him slowly and stood by his side.

The woman led them into the bright room and to a wicker table in a secluded corner. When they were seated she nodded, sending a wink in Harry's direction, and left them. With a sheepish smile Harry turned back to Hermione. Her head was down and she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Mi?" she still didn't raise her head. "*Maybe I shouldn't have done that.*" He reached over and placed his hands over her's. "Look 'Mi...I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that, I don't know what came over me-" he was interrupted when she burst into laughter.

"Oh My-Oh my god!" she said through her laughter. "Did you see her face?!" she giggled again. "That was priceless." She looked up into his bemused face. "What? Did you think that I'd be angry?" he had the grace to blush.

"Well, yeah." She snorted and shook her head.

"I know you Harry. You would *never* do anything to hurt me, to hurt anyone. I love you and I trust you and I know you would never cheat on me." She leaned over and kissed him softly.

"You're right. I never would and I do love you." He squeezed her hand.

A boy, just a bit older than them walked over to them. He had cropped black hair and dark brown eyes.

"Hi! My name is Bobby and I'll be your waiter today!" he said cheerfully, a huge grin on his face. He handed them each a menu. They quickly looked over them, picking what they wanted.

"Would you like to hear our specials?!" before they could answer he launched into them. "Today's specials are-

"Is it okay if we go ahead and order?" Harry interrupted. Bobby's face fell.

"...You don't want me to tell you the specials?" he asked, his voice small and the cheerfulness gone. Harry and Hermione exchanged a bemused glance.

"Err...no. We'd just like to go ahead and order." Harry said as if he was speaking to a small child. Bobby bit his lip.

"But-But I like to say the specials." His bottom lip had begun to tremble. "*Ok...this is getting weird.*" "Why won't you let me say the specials?! Did I offend you in any way? I'm sorry!" Hermione's hands flew up; interrupting his little rant before he could begin to hyperventilate.

"No! It's ok, you can go ahead and tell them to us." She said in a soothing voice. Harry pressed his lips tightly together, trying not to laugh. The tears disappeared from the boy's eyes and his grin returned.

"Today's lunch special is Turkey Meatballs and Pasta in broth made with homemade chicken stock. And our dessert special is Crème Fraiche Ice Cream served with fresh blackberries on the side." He was practically bouncing when he finished.

"Thank you." Hermione said politely, shooting the sniggering Harry a sharp look.

After giving him their orders (Iced Tea and Sesame Udon Noodles for Hermione and a Coke and Ham Sandwich for Harry.) he left, smiling brightly, and Harry turned to Hermione.

“So, do you think any of the information will be useful?” she nodded and pulled the notebook out of her bag.

“Yeah, I was thinking about what she said about him taking those children to the cave. From what I can guess it seems that before then he had only been using physical force to harm others but then he *must* have used magic. Don’t you think that would’ve been a special place to him?” Harry nodded thoughtfully.

“I think we’ll need to check it out for sure.” He said. Bobby returned with their orders and placed them on the table, after a small smile he left them.

Hermione slurped a noodle into her mouth then looked at Harry questionably.

“Did you find anything useful from Slytherin’s diary?” He took a sip of his drink.

“Yes, he describes the locket in more detail. You know, size, color, design.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “And the diary isn’t actually written in parsel-tongue, it’s just charmed so only those how can speak it can read it.”

“Genius.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Salazar Slytherin was an extremely intelligent man, if you see past his complete ignorance when it comes to ‘purity’.” He snorted. “There isn’t any mention of where it could have been hidden though.”

“How was it described?”

“Well he said it was gold and heavy. It wasn’t very flashy, just a simple gold locket though one identifying factor, an ornate, serpentine S.” She took a sip of her tea and also leaned back in her chair.

“Heavy gold locket, huh?” he looked at her faraway expression.

“What?” he asked. Her brows furrowed and she leaned forward.

"I was thinking. Last year when Dumbledore had us cooped up in Grimmauld some of the Order members, Hestia and Kingsley I think it was, found a heavy golden locket while they were cleaning. No one could seem to get it open..." she shrugged. "But I doubt that's what it was, why would Voldemort hide it in Grimmauld?"

"Yeah, I seriously doubt that it would be there but we still should check." They ate in silence for a few more minutes until Harry broke it.

"We need to speak to Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop." Hermione grinned at him.

"I was thinking the same thing."

"How will we find them?" Her grin widened.

"The muggle way. The internet." After they finished their meal and paid for their food they left the small bistro.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"The library." His eyes raised skyward.

"I should have guessed!" she smack him, none too gently, on the arm. They swung onto the gleaming bike and zipped down the street, heading to the nearest library.

They pulled up next to the large stone building and got off of the bike. There weren't many people around, a few students sat on the steps and an old woman sat on a bench feeding birds. She gave them a small nod as they walked up the stairs.

Hermione swung open the door and they were instantly hit by a blast of cool air. They walked towards a long marble desk where an older man with salt-and-pepper hair stood.

"Excuse me." Harry said softly. The man gave them a warm smile.

"Hello, how can I help you?" Hermione returned his smile.

“Hello, where are your computers?” he pointed to a glass room on the other side of the room. They gave him a nod of thanks and went into the room.

It was fairly empty. There was a woman on one of the computers with a bouncing little boy on her lap.

Hermione slid into a chair in front of a computer and Harry pulled a chair over next to her.

“You know how to work one of these things?” he asked quietly, squinting at the machine.

“Of course Harry.” She giggled. She clicked something and the internet came on. She went to the first search site she could find and typed in ‘Dennis Bishop’.

‘Dennis Bishop, born 1924.....’ Hermione’s eyebrows shot up.

“Well, that was easy.” She clicked.

It was a news clipping. There was picture of an old man with balding gray hair. He was standing in front of an old house with an oversized check and a huge grin on his heavily wrinkled face. Hermione clicked on the picture and it became larger.

“He won the numbers.” She said smiling. “Good for him, he needed some good in his life.” Harry leaned closer and squinted at the screen, trying to figure out where he was.

“Can you tell what that says?” he asked, pointing to what seemed to be an address on the doorframe of the house. She also leaned closer, squinting, then shook her head.

“No, I can’t quite make it out. Hold on, I have an idea.” She clicked a button at the top of the screen and a printer under the desk buzzed. In a couple of seconds it spit out the enlarged picture.

Without warning she yanked Harry’s glasses from his face and held them over the picture, using them as a magnifying glass.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. She ignored him and leaned closer to the picture.

“Found it!” she exclaimed, jumping up from the chair. She made to go to the door when she noticed Harry wasn’t following, remembering he was near blind without his glasses she blushed and handed them back to him.

“Thanks.” He said dryly. She rolled her eyes and stuffed the picture into her pocket.

“Come on, let’s get going.” She dragged him out of the room and back to the desk where the man still stood.

“What can I help you with?” he asked pleasantly.

“Could I please have a map?” Hermione asked. He nodded and reached under the desk, pulling out a folded map and handing it to her.

“Thank you.” He nodded. They left the library.

“Where is it?” Harry asked, shielding his eyes from the sun with one hand. They jogged down the stone steps and to the bike.

“It’s a bit far from here.” She said. They swung onto the bike and she told him the address. She shot out directions as he zigzagged through traffic. Even with her shouting in his ear he managed to get them lost at least twice.

It took them nearly an hour before they finally pulled in front of where the old house. It didn’t look nearly as old and decrepit as it did in the photo.

It looked as if Mr. Bishop had completely remodeled the home. It was painted a bright white with red shutters and a high white gate surrounded it, he had even added an extra story. There was an intercom box next to the gate.

Hermione stepped off of the bike and Harry swung off after her. They stepped in front of the intercom and Harry reached up and pushed the small red button on the metal contraption.

"Mr. Bishop?" he asked hesitantly. There was a silence on the other end then a slightly distorted male voice sounded through.

"What do you want?" it asked gruffly. "Whatever you're selling I'm not buying." The line went dead. After a glance to Hermione he pushed the button again.

"Mr. Bishop? We're not selling anything. We're reporters from the National Children's League magazine. My colleague and I are doing a report on orphanages in the 1920's and '30's. While we were doing an interview at Saint Joseph's Home for Orphaned Children your name came up. Can we come in and ask a few questions?" There was another silence on the other end then the gruff voice spoke again.

"What exactly do you want to question me about?" his voice was low and suspicious. Hermione pushed him aside.

"Mr. Bishop? We just want to ask you a few questions on what it was like growing up in St. Joseph's." The man mumbled something then there was a buzzing noise coming from the door. It swung open. "Thank you." Hermione said into the intercom.

After a glance at his gleaming bike Harry followed Hermione down the narrow walkway and up to the door. The tall wooden door swung open before they had to knock.

The same man from the photo stood in the doorway glowering at them. The grin was gone from his wrinkled face and he was leaning heavily against a thick cane at his side. He was wearing a worn blue bath robe, dark blue pajama bottoms, and a pair of frayed loafers. His hard blue eyes glared at them suspiciously under his heavy eyebrows.

"You're not reporters." He said. His voice was gruff and scratchy, like he had a sore throat. He turned his head and began to cough violently. They winced at the painful sound. He took a deep and wheezy breath then turned back to them. "What are you selling?" he asked again. He was definitely less intimidating with his watery eyes

and bright red nose. Hermione shot him one of her sweetest and warmest smiles.

“We really aren’t selling anything, sir. We’re actually on interns for the paper you see, we’ve come in the place of the actual reporter, she had a family emergency.” He eyed them for another second the stepped back inside of the house, leaving the door open. They took it as an invitation to follow and they walked in, closing the door behind them. They followed the limping man into a cluttered kitchen. He gestured towards to mismatched chairs and they sat. He bustled around the kitchen, making a pot of tea. He didn’t bother to ask what they liked in their tea; he roughly placed the chipped cups in front of them causing the steaming liquid to slosh over the sides and onto the already stained tabletop.

“Go ahead, ask your questions.” The old man grumbled. Hermione pulled out her notebook and sparkly pen and looked at Harry expectantly. He cleared his throat and shifted his gaze to the man across from him.

“Ok Mr. Bishop. What was it like growing up in the orphanage?” he asked. The man took a sip of his tea.

“Horrible.” He stated. Harry shifted uncomfortably as he waited for the man to continue. When he didn’t seem to have any intention of doing so he cleared his throat again.

“Alright, can we ask you about something specific?” the man’s puffy eye narrowed suspiciously.

“Go on then.” Harry leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands in front of him.

“We’d like to ask you about Tom Riddle.” He flinched when the man’s tea cup went sailing over the side of the table and onto the floor. His face had gone ashen and he was fairly shaking with fear and anger.

“Get-Get out.” His voice shook with the force of his fury. Harry held up his hands in a placating gesture.

“I’m sorry, I meant no-” The man stood with surprising speed.

“GET OUT!” his shout near shook the house. Swallowing his slight pang of fear Harry tried to calm him.

“Look, sir.” His voice was calm and soft. “We don’t have to speak of it if you don’t want to.” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Hermione leaned across the table and drop a small drop of clear liquid into the pot of tea. “Let’s just sit down and take a few calming breaths, eh?” The man looked ready to slap him. He closed his eyes and took several shaky breaths. When they opened again he was visibly calmer and his expression was bleak. He stumbled back into his chair.

“Would you like some more tea, sir?” Hermione asked softly. The man turned his wary eye to her and nodded once. She stood up from the chair and picked up a mug off of one of the cluttered counters. She carefully poured the tainted tea into the coffee stained mug and handed it to the man. Without glancing at the cup he took a big gulp, his eyes instantly became blank and his body relaxed.

“I feel kind of bad.” Hermione muttered next to him. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I was necessary.” He stepped closer to the catatonic man and leaned close. “What is your full name?”

“**Dennis Edmund Bishop.**” He intoned. Hermione smiled grimly and also stepped closer.

“What happened when you went into the cave with Tom Riddle?” she asked.

“**Amy and I were searching for shells on the shore when he approached us. He asked if we wanted to go exploring with him. We had a first said no but...I felt compelled to go and so did Amy. We followed him over a passage of rough rocks, I remember the waves coming up and soaking our shoes but we kept going. The cave was so cold...we could see our breath. Tom turned to us and he had this look...this horrible look on his face, he was smiling and the sight of it sent chills down my spine. I was so scared. I wanted to run. I couldn’t. I couldn’t move.**” He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. “**He**

said...He said '***You'll never tease me again***' and then...it hurt so bad!" he let out a dry sob. "**We were screaming so loud but no one came! No one! It was like someone was tearing of my skin and stabbing me all over with knives. I just wanted to die. After what seemed like forever the pain stopped. I remember coughing up blood. Amy was sobbing so loudly...I could barely breathe. When I forced my eyes open Tom was standing over us with a smirk on his face...he was enjoying it! He was laughing at our pain!**" he let out another sob. "**He looked down at us and sneered. He called us worthless. He forced us to follow him back down the rocks and back to the other children. He told us that if we ever told anyone he'd make sure the pain would never stop. We never told. We never told anyone.**" He had begun to rock in his seat. Hermione turned to Harry, her face white and eyes sad.

"Well, at least we know what happened." She said. Harry shook his head sadly and looked at the crumpled man in front of them.

"Will he remember this?" he asked quietly. She bit her lip and nodded.

"We'll have to obliviate him." His eyebrows shot up.

"Isn't that a difficult spell?" she waved a hand dismissively.

"Not that difficult." She slid her wand out of her pocket and stood directly in front of the now whimpering man. She took a deep breath.

"**Obliviate.**" The spell hit him full on in the face. He blinked sleepily for a second then looked at them, his eyes widening.

"Who are you?" he asked, alarmed. Harry lifted his wand.

"**Stupefy.**" The man dropped, his head hitting the table. Hermione slapped Harry in the arm.

"You could've done that somewhere else!" she exclaimed. He rolled his eyes and flicked his wand at the still form of the old man. He rose gently into the air and Harry floated him into the living room and laid him on his couch, arranging a few pillows around him. Hermione placed his cane next to him and quickly put the cups and pot of tea away.

“He should be up in a few hours.” She said, softly. He grabbed the notebook off of the table and slipped it into his bag. They left the house and nearly ran down the sidewalk. They hardly hesitated to pull on their helmets before jetting out of the quiet neighborhood.

The trip back to Grimmauld only took them a couple of hours but the sun was beginning to set when they pulled into the alley. When the bike was shrunken Harry slipped it into his pocket and they walked quickly down the sidewalk and to the familiar home.

Hermione tapped sharply on the door. Remus promptly answered the door.

“Hey.” He greeted them. “Good trip?” they exchanged glances.

“You could say that.” They stepped into the strangely quiet house.

“Where’s Cattie?” Harry asked, confused. Remus grinned and gestured for them to follow him. He led them into the large living room and they grinned.

Catherine was sprawled across the couch, surrounded by toys. Her boots were off and her tiny strip socked feet peeked from under a red blanket. Tonks was sitting in a chair next to the couch watching her. She looked up when they walked in.

“You guys have fun?” Hermione asked, gesturing to the mess of toys everywhere. Tonks grinned and stood up from the chair.

“Yep! She has some great toys.”

“And she played with every one of them.” Remus quipped from the doorway. Tonks childishly stuck her tongue out at him. She made to walk over to them but she stumbled over a stray block, Remus caught her before she hit the ground. Her cheeks flushed brightly.

“I swear, you’re the only person I know who could walk on a completely flat surface and still manage to trip over something.” He teased. She shot him an ugly look.

“I wasn’t walking over a flat surface! I tripped over a *toy*.”

"Excuses, excuses." She delivered a sharp kick in his shins. Hermione grinned and shook her head, she flicked her wand and Catherine's little pink backpack came sailing from under the couch,

"Pack." She said. The various toys jumped from the floor and other hiding places and deposited themselves neatly into the bag. She zipped it up and swung it over her shoulder.

"She didn't wear you guys out did she?" Harry asked.

"No." Remus said, smiling warmly. "It's fun having a kid in the house." Harry walked over to the couch and looked down at his sleeping child, a soft smile touching his face. He brushed a curl from her soft face and gently lifted her up. She instantly wrapped her tiny arms around his neck, snuggling her face into his shoulder.

"She wore herself out." Hermione said, rubbing a hand down her back. She stood on her toes and kissed her forehead.

They said their goodbyes to the older couple, and stepped through the flames. Surprisingly Catherine didn't wake up during the wild trip through the floo. She didn't even stir.

"Let me take her to bed." Hermione said when they stepped into the warm family room. Harry gently handed the sleeping child to Hermione. He followed them up the stairs and headed to their room while she went to the little girl's bedroom.

He sunk onto the bed, feeling more worn out and tired than he had in a long while. As he pulled the notebook out of his bag and placed it on the bed he noticed the little wooden box at the bottom of the bag. With a sigh he reached in and pulled the box out. He had already put the necklace away in his trunk but he had been carrying the rings around with him everywhere.

"What am I going to do with these?" he thought exasperatedly. *"Could I really ask her to marry me?"* he turned the box over in his hands, his eye faraway. He had been agonizing over just this question ever since he had taken them from the vault. He loved her, he knew that much. He loved her more than anyone, well save Catherine, but *marriage?* That was a big step!

He stuffed the case back into his bag when he heard the door crack open. Hermione was pulling off her hoodie when she stepped through the door.

"Cattie says 'Goodnight' and 'I love you.'" She said grinning. She threw herself onto the bed. "It's been a long day." She sighed. He lay down next to her

"A very long day." She lifted herself onto her elbow and looked at him.

"I'm not sure if we found out anything terribly valuable." He shook his head.

"No, we did. Those caves sound promising." She nodded thoughtfully.

"I guess. Sounds like we'll be making another trip soon." She got off of the bed with a groan. "I'm going to go take a shower, ok?" he shrugged.

As soon as she disappeared through the bathroom door he took the box back out and placed it in front of him, staring at it.

You'd think it'd be easier. You'd think it would be a no-brainer but every time he'd make up his mind to do it he'd panic and back out. He had every reason to marry her and no reason not to so why couldn't he just ask her?! He reached over and opened the case, slipping out the dainty ring and twirling it in his fingers. *"How am I going to ask her?!"*

"H-Harry?" a breathless voice said from behind him. He froze. "What is that?" he turned slowly to see a damp haired Hermione standing behind him, a hand over her heart and her eyes wide and staring at the obvious engagement ring in his hand. He swallowed thickly and turned fully to her.

"Hermione. I have something to ask you."

A/N: Muhahahahah!! Cliffie :P.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thank you all for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 16

"Hermione. I have something to ask you." She shakily stepped closer to him. He swallowed again, his throat suddenly dry. He stood up from the bed and took her hands in his.

"I know we're young but...I know I couldn't live my life without you." He bit his lip nervously. "I...I know that this is sudden...I just-I just want you to know that you're the only person I want to spend the rest of my life with." Her eyes were filling with tears and her breathing was uneven. He reached over and captured her hands in his. "I want you to be my forever." He said softly.

"Harry...I..." the tears were now flowing freely down her cheeks. He reached up and brushed them from her cheeks, staring deep into her eyes.

"You don't have to answer now 'Mi. Just know that I love you, I'll wait as long as you like." He released her and made to step around her, heading to the bathroom to take his own shower.

Hermione caught the back of his shirt; he turned back to her slowly.

"Say it." She whispered through her tears. "Please." His heart was pounding, he felt like it would explode right out of his chest. He reclaimed her hands and looked into her eyes.

"Hermione Granger. Will you marry me?" she nodded, a sob slipping from her lips. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Yes. I'll marry you." The air rushed from his lungs, he had never felt so absolutely elated in his life. He squeezed her closer to him, his own eyes burning with tears.

When he finally released her he picked up her left hand and slipped the ring onto her finger.

It flashed white for a second then changed to a sapphire. The band was a braided in gold and platinum, it shrunk so it fit her finger perfectly. Hermione stared at the ring in wonder.

“Where-Where did you get this?” she asked.

“It was my grandmother’s, and my mother’s.” she looked back up at him; her eyes alight with happiness and a soft smile on her face.

“You know this changes everything, right?” she whispered.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He leaned closer kissed her gently. She twined her arms around his neck and returned the kiss with enthusiasm.

When they finally released one another Hermione looked back at the elegant ring on her finger and suddenly shrieked.

“Oh my god! We’re going to get married!” she began bouncing around the room. Her face looked brighter than he had ever seen it and the grin on her face was infectious. He laughed, feeling suddenly giddy. “Is this what was in your bag that day?” she asked, gesturing to the ring.

“Yeah.” He blushed sheepishly. “I saw it while I was in my family vaults and...” he shrugged. He looked at her and grinned.

“Are you sure you want to marry me?” she laughed and hugged him again.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Soon they stopped their giddy celebrations and Harry went and took his shower. When he returned Hermione was lying on her back on their bed staring at the ring on her finger, an almost awed smile on her face. He walked the rest of the way into the room and lay down beside her. She turned her gaze from the jewelry and smiled at him.

“I can’t stop smiling.” She said giggling. He grinned and threaded his fingers through hers, turning his wrist so he could see the ring on her hand.

“Look at us ‘Mi. We have our own house, a kid, and now we’re getting married.” He shook his head in wonder. “I think we’ve turned into adults.” She laughed and rolled so she was resting against his chest.

"I know, crazy isn't it?" she giggled again. Her smile faltered for a second. "I don't think we should get married for a while." His heart stopped. Was she changing her mind?

"Err...Why not?"

"I think we should wait until it's over. Until Voldemort is gone." He sat up and looked down at her.

"That could take *years* 'Mi!" she also sat up.

"I know but...I just think that if we, you know, had a wedding I wouldn't want it to be marred by a war! I don't want to have to worry about Voldemort and his minions attacking at any second!" he sighed and sank back onto the bed.

"Yeah...I guess you're right."

They sat in comfortable silence a little while longer, just enjoying one another's company. Hermione snuggled closer to him and kissed his chin. He looked down at her, an eyebrow raised.

"What was that for?" she smiled and kissed his nose.

"I love you." She said simply. She kissed his cheeks and then his lips.

"I love you to." He said against her lips. She giggled and placed a sloppy kiss on his cheek, her hand sliding under his t-shirt. He bit his lip when her fingers trailed across his stomach.

"Her-Hermione." His eyes closed briefly when she began to kiss behind his ear. "W-What are you doing?" he winced when his voice cracked at the end. She laughed again, a low sound that sent shivers down his spine.

"I'm kissing you of course." He had never heard her speak in that tone before. His breathing was becoming a bit unsteady.

When she drew away from him she shot him a triumphant look at his disappointed expression. His eyes narrowed at the smug look on her face. Before she could think he had rolled over so she was under him

and her arms were pinned firmly above her head. She shrieked in surprise. His face was a mere inch from her's and a smirk danced on his lips.

"It's not nice to tease 'Mi." his emerald eyes had darkened a shade and they were smoldering with intensity. She looked up at him, her eyes looking wide and innocent.

"Tease? Whatever do you mean Harry?" the entire time she's speaking she's sliding up the bottom of his shirt. He rolled his eyes and pressed his lips to hers, fighting a grin when she shivered and wrapped her arms around his neck. He pressed closer to her. *"This could be fun."*

Once again he awoke to the feeling of the sun hitting his closed eyelids. He groaned and pulled one of the large soft pillows over his head. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, trying in vain to go back to sleep.

Finally realizing his effort was moot he pulled the pillow off of his head and sat up, frowning slightly when the air met his bare chest. Where was his shirt? He squinted, trying to remember what had happened last night. A grin filled his face when he remembered.

He swung his legs off the side of the bed and stood, scratching the back of his head. He and Hermione hadn't gone *too* far last night but they had definitely gone farther than they ever had before.

He looked at the watch on his wrist, it was nearly 11am, no wonder he was by himself. He grabbed an outfit out of the wardrobe and padded into the large bathroom. His grin returned when he spotted the bite mark on his shoulder.

He was still grinning when he stepped out of the bathroom. He was wearing a loose gray t-shirt, his dark jeans fit him snugly, and his hair was in complete disarray. He decided to forgo shoes. He opened the bedroom door and stepped out of the room and nearly tripped over Catherine.

"Morning Daddy!" she said happily. She was laying on her stomach in the hallway, a pad of paper and her magical paints in front of her

and Trouble sitting in front of her. She was wearing light colored jeans with pink flowers embroidered up the sides and a white t-shirt. Her wild dark curls were pulled into her signature braid and she was swinging her bare feet. He grinned down at the little girl and picked her up.

“Good morning, princess.” She grinned happily at the nickname. “What are you doing in the hallway?”

“Painting a picture of Trouble.” She said, gesturing to a slightly familiar looking gray blob on her paper that ran around in crazy circles.

“Wow! What a nice picture.” He placed her back on the floor. “Where’s your Mommy?” she pointed down the hallway towards the library, already once again absorbed in her painting.

“I can count by tens up to a hundred, I can count by tens ready here we go...Ten, Twenty, Thirty, Forty, Fifty, Sixty, Seventy, Eighty, Ninety, One hundred!” she sang as she painted.

“Where’d you learn that song?” he asked.

“Mommy.” He nodded and rubbed her curls again. He headed towards the library.

He found her standing in front of one of the bookcases running her fingers over the spines. She was wearing a deep blue tunic and khakis, her hair loose and falling down her back.

He snuck up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and placing a series of small kisses on her neck. She tilted her head to give him better access.

“Good morning, love.” He whispered in her ear. She turned and wrapped her arms loosely around his waist, giving him a warm smile.

“Good morning to you to.” She said, grinning. He tucked a stray curl behind her ear.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” he asked.

"I couldn't! You were so cute sleeping like that!" he mock scowled.

"Harry Potter is not *cute*!" she giggled and kissed him again.

"No, you're cute." She stepped out of his arms, ignoring the pout on his face and went back to the books. "We didn't ask about the locket at Grimmauld and we didn't ask where exactly the caves were." She said. He slapped himself on the forehead. How had he forgotten?!

"We'll have to call the orphanage and I'll talk to Remus about the locket before my training." He sighed. "I'm sure he and Tonks won't mind if we look around a bit." She turned from the shelves and grinned.

"Speaking of Remus and Tonks, I think I figured out what's different about Tonks." He raised an eyebrow at her excited expression.

"What?"

"She's pregnant!" he blinked. Then blinked again.

"Who?" she sighed in exasperation but the smile was still on her face.

"Tonks! She and Remus are going to have a *baby*!"

"How do you figure that?"

"The morning sickness, Remus's overprotection, their extreme giddiness?!" He thought back on their behavior, he hadn't even noticed anything! A grin slowly made its way onto his face.

"I think you're right!" the grin dropped from his face, if Remus and Tonks were having a baby that means they...His face lost all color and he suddenly felt nauseas. Hermione must have known what he was thinking because she burst into giggles.

"Oh grow up Harry; it's a natural part of life." He grimaced.

"Don't remind me." He spent a few more minutes in the library with his Fiancé then after a kiss left the room. He wanted to get in some spell work before Remus arrived.

Catherine was no longer in the hallway, her paints and Trouble was also gone. He stepped back into their bedroom to grab a pair of shoes when he found her. She was lying on her back on the huge green bed holding the picture of Harry's grandparents and parents.

"Hey Kitty-Cat. Whatcha doing?" she looked up from the photo and smiled.

"Who's this Daddy?" he walked over to the bed, coming to sit beside her.

"Well this is *my* Mommy and Daddy, your grandparents." He said, pointing to his smiling parents. "And this is my grandparents, your great-grandparents."

"Oh." She waved back at the picture, giggling slightly. "Your Mommy is pretty." He smiled sadly.

"Yeah, she was." He shook his head, trying to rid his mind of the sad thoughts. "Would you like to see some more pictures?" she nodded excitedly and he stood up from the bed. He pulled his trunk from the foot of the bed and popped it open, pulling his photo album out. He sat back on the bed, pulling the little girl onto his lap. He opened it so it rested on her lap. He pointed to a picture of his parents with him as a baby.

"Here's me" he pointed to the grinning green eyed baby. "And that's my Mum and Dad." She squinted at the picture.

"You're so tiny Daddy!" he chuckled. "You have the same eyes as your Mommy."

"Yes, and so do you." She turned the page and looked at the picture of his parent's wedding. He felt a familiar stinging behind his eyes; it had been a long time since he looked at this photo.

"What a pretty dress!" The child exclaimed.

"Yeah." Hearing the sadness in his voice Catherine turned around in his lap and looked up into his face.

"What's the matter Daddy?" she asked softly. He forced a shaky smile onto his face.

"Nothing, love. Sometimes Daddy gets sad when he looks at this picture."

"Because they died?" he nodded with difficulty. Catherine wrapped her tiny arms around his neck, pressing her cheek against his. "I'm sorry Daddy. You miss them huh?"

"Yes, I do but I know that they're in a happier place now." He felt her nod against his shoulder and she released him. She looked back at the picture then turned back to him, a slight confused expression on her face.

"Daddy? How did they die?" she asked hesitantly. He took a shaky breath.

"Do you remember those bad people who hurt your Mommy?" he asked quietly. She nodded, her eyes troubled. "Well those people are the followers of a very bad man named Voldermort. When I was just a baby he came to my house and killed my parents. He tried to kill me but the spell didn't work. I'm very famous for that." She giggled when he rolled his eyes. "You need to remember, a lot of wizards are good people but there are also some you need to be careful about, ok?" she nodded firmly. He closed the book and placed her on the floor. "Now go and play."

"Ok, bye Daddy!" she skipped out of the room. Once she disappeared through the door he picked the album back up, a small sigh slipping from his lips. He ran his fingers over the worn leather cover; it had been so long since he had allowed himself time to think about his family.

He stood up and made to place the album back in his trunk when he stopped. He turned back around and placed it in the drawer of his nightstand. He needed a reminder of them, of their love.

He grabbed his shoes and left the bedroom, heading up the stairs and into the dueling room. He flicked his wand and a practice dummy appeared before him. He took a deep breath, focusing on his magic.

“Incara Inflamora Globo!” a large ball of fire erupted from his wand and sped towards the dummy. The dummy was instantly engulfed in flames but instead of just setting it alight the fire incased it in a bubble of pure flame. The bubble pulsed and swirled until finally it began to shrink, soon it disappeared completely, leaving nothing more than ashes on the stone floor. He grinned.

“Wicked.” He had found the spell in his defense with household charms book, he had been waiting to try it out for ages. *“I can’t believe I got it on the first try!”* he flicked his wand again and the ashes disappeared, he quickly conjured another dummy. This time he decided to try something a bit different. He waved his wand over the dummy and it shook, then began to chase him.

“Incara Inflamora Globo!” he shouted as he ran. The ball of flame once again engulfed the running dummy, encasing it in its molten embrace. He grinned again. He flicked his wand, banishing the ashes then waved it again. Four more dummies appeared in front of him and at once began to chase him.

An hour later he collapsed onto one of the mats feeling completely exhausted. He was sweating like crazy and he had singed his arm when he stood too close to one of the dummies when he had set it on fire but he felt great.

The feeling of power rushing through him was nearly addictive. All the time he’d spent on theory was definitely paying off.

He lifted himself off of the floor with a groan and walked, slowly, out of the cool room. As soon as he stepped through the door he ran into Hermione.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “I was looking for you.” He grinned tiredly at her.

“Miss me already?” she snorted and rolled her eyes but she still gave him a kiss. She gave him an once-over.

“What were you *doing?*” she asked, taking in his ruffled appearance.

“Practicing.” She rolled her eyes again and pushed him towards the stairs.

“Go take a shower, it’s time for lunch. Cattie and I will be outside waiting for you.” They had reached the second floor. Harry stopped and crossed his arms.

“Are you bossing me around?” she smiled sweetly.

“Of course. If I’m going to be your wife you better get used to it.” She kissed him on the cheek then fairly skipped down the stairs.

He grinned after her, “*My wife. I like that.*” He jogged to the bedroom and kicked off his shoes. He took a quick shower and pulled his jeans back on and a clean black button-up shirt which he had left the top three buttons unbuttoned. He didn’t bother putting his shoes back on, he jogged downstairs and out the back door. He could see Hermione and Catherine sitting on a blanket under one of the huge willow trees in the backyard.

He padded out the door and onto the deck. Catherine waved at him happily from her spot on the ground. His feet sunk into the soft, cool grass as he walked over to them. He plopped down on the blanket under the leafy shade of the tree and Catherine promptly sat on his lap.

“We’re having a picnic!” she said, gesturing to the white wicker basket my Hermione’s side.

“It’s a good day for it.” Hermione said, grinning. She pulled the basket onto the red and white blanket and began pulling out the food. There were plates of sandwiches, cookies, cakes, fruits, pitchers of cool pumpkin juice and water; just about everything was in the basket. It must have been charmed to hold everything and keep them fresh.

“It was so sunny we couldn’t stay inside.” She said. They spent the meal laughing and playing around, throwing food at one another, and relaxing.

Harry was still laughing when he reached for the last chocolate chip cookie, when Catherine's hand shot out and snatched it right out of his hand.

"Did you just take my cookie?!"

"Yep." she giggled and took a huge bite of it.

"I'm going to get you now!" she shrieked and jumped up to run but he caught her around the waist, and began to tickle her. "Teach you to take my cookie!" he said over her shrieks of laughter. He continued on tickling her until they were interrupted by a flash of light. He stopped tickling the child and turned quickly to Hermione. She was holding what looked like a very old camera though smaller, about the size of a one-use camera.

"Where'd you get that?" he asked curiously.

"I bought it in Diagon Alley." She tapped the top of the camera with her wand and it spit out a piece of paper. The paper fluttered in the air for a moment before landing on Hermione's lap. She picked it up and looked at it, a smile blooming on her face. She handed it to him. He looked down at the photo in his hand and smiled also.

You could see him grabbing the escaping child in his arms and mercilessly tickling her, the obvious happiness of the photo was what really brought the smile to his face. For the first time in his life he knew he was actually really happy.

The sun was beginning to set when they packed up and went back inside. Remus would be there in a few minutes and Catherine needed to be in bed.

It had been an all together great afternoon. They had played a nearly hour long game of tag and a game of hide-and-seek. Hermione had taken tons more pictures, she had even let Catherine take the camera and take a few.

"That's a pretty ring, Mommy." Catherine said yawning, looking at the ring on the hand she was holding.

"Thank you, your Daddy gave it to me."

"Why?" Hermione and Harry exchanged a glance.

"Well." Hermione began. "Your Daddy and I have decided to get married." Her bright green eyes widened.

"Really?!" she bounced up and down. "Does that mean you'll get to wear a pretty dress and there be flowers and everything?!" when Hermione nodded, an amused grin on her face, she squealed.

Hermione scooped her up and Harry gave her a goodnight kiss. He watched as she carried the small girl up the stairs then went into the family room, throwing himself onto one of the comfy leather couches.

Remus should be here in about fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes later he glanced at the large clock over the mantle, a frown working its way onto his face. He was only five minutes late but Remus was *never* late. Ten minutes later he was really starting to get worried, he was just about to floo over to Grimmauld when the fire flared green and Remus stepped out. Relief rushed through him.

"What took you so long?" he asked, jumping up from his seat. The older man brushed the ash from his robes and smiled.

"Tonks was feeling sick again and I didn't want to leave her until she was feeling better." Harry grinned.

"Sick, huh?" Remus's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What?" Harry shook his head innocently and turned to leave the room.

"Nothing, nothing at all." Still shooting him suspicious looks Remus followed him up the stairs and into the dueling room. His eyebrows shot up when he noticed the burn marks on the floor.

"What happened here?"

"I was practicing a new fire spell."

“Really? Which one?”

“Incara Inflamora Globo.” The werewolf’s eyebrows shot up again.

“Well lets see it then!” he took a few steps back and conjured up a practice dummy.

Harry nodded. His eyes narrowed in concentration. His mouth thinning into a firm line and his breathing slowed. He raised his wand.

“Incara Inflamora Globo!” the now familiar ball of flame erupted from the tip of his wand and sped with blinding speed towards the helpless dummy, surrounding it in an instant. It barely took a full second for the dummy to be completely incinerated.

“Amazing!” Remus exclaimed from behind him. “How long have you been learning that?” Harry shrugged.

“First time was today.” Remus stared at him in shock for a second then shook his head.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” He suddenly grinned again and shed his robe, throwing it into a corner. “I think its time we duel.”

“Err...what?”

“You need to know how to duel with a *human*. The dummies have been working great but they can’t think like a human can.” He effortlessly slid into dueling stance, a smirk appearing on his face. “Unless you’re scared that is.” Harry’s eyes narrowed and he matched Remus’s stance.

“Let’s go.” Without even pausing for the standard bow Remus shot a bright red light at Harry, his lips not moving. He dove to the side, narrowly missing the light, and flicked his wand in the werewolf’s direction, his own mouth unmoving.

He moved fluidly, like water. The spell flew harmlessly away from him and he shot another spell at Harry.

With another flick of his wand a bright white shield appeared in front of him, effectively absorbing the blasting spell. He lowered his shield and quickly shot out four spells in succession. The first two Remus easily dodged, one hitting a wall and creating a rather large hole and the other incinerating a few of the mats but the third he wasn't able to avoid and he threw up a shield, it might have helped if it wasn't for the fourth which slammed into the shield and it rippled dangerously. The force of the spell almost caused him to lose his footing. His amber eyes narrowed and he once again raised his wand. With what sounded suspiciously like a growl he began shooting a barrage of spells at the teen. Inwardly cursing Harry took off across the stone room, shooting stunners and curses over his shoulder; he dived behind the platform and shot a spell at the remaining cushions. They immediately sprung from the floor and began attacking Remus, he began blasting them but there were too many.

"Expelliarmus!" he didn't bother to cast the spell silently. Remus's wand flew into his hand and he lifted the spell from the few remaining cushions. With a smirk he walked over to the panting Remus, his own breath coming in tired gasps.

"I won." He gloated. He didn't even see it coming, so sure in his victory he didn't see the smirk on the older man's face.

"Petrificus Totalus." He said softly. The spell flew from his outstretched hand and hit Harry dead-on in the chest sending him, stiff, to the hard stone floor. ***"Accio Wand."*** Both Remus's wand and his shot from Harry's frozen hands and into his grasp.

Inwardly Harry was seething at his own stupidity, how had he let his guard down like that?! *Never* believe your opponent is truly down unless they're dead! Awe also filtered into his mind, Remus had just performed *wandless magic*! He had seen Dumbledore do it before but he didn't really think that Remus was that powerful!

Said man looked down at him with a small frown on his face though his eyes were warm.

"That was a very big mistake Harry. If I had been a death eater you'd be dead." He waved his wand over Harry and he felt his muscles

relax. He forced himself to his feet, ignoring the twinge of pain from his back.

"I want to try again." Remus shook his head.

"I don't think that's a good idea right now, Cub. You're tired and I know that fall must have hurt you." Harry shook his head, anger starting to surge through his veins. He wasn't going to let the man beat him and leave.

"No, I want to try it again." Remus sighed.

"Look Harry, it's late and-" He was cut off when Harry suddenly waved his own hand, his wand flying from Remus's grasp and back into his.

"*Again.*" Remus's eyebrows had shot up, his eyes a bit wide. He nodded slowly, letting himself slide back into dueling position.

"Alright then Harry, we'll try this again." Without any kind of warning Remus began firing spells. With a new vigor Harry jumped into action, firing his own spells. "*I will **not** lose again.*"

With sore muscles and exhausted minds Harry and Remus sunk onto the repaired cushions. They had dueled for more than an hour and they had accumulated quite a collection of injuries.

Harry shifted slightly, wincing at the flare of pain it sent through his side. He could barely force himself to wipe away the bead of sweat that was making a dangerously close journey near his right eye; he licked a drop of blood from his lip and sighed.

Remus had walloped him more than he'd like to admit but he took comfort in the fact that he had managed to win a least one of the duels and Remus was nearly as hurt as he was.

"You did well Harry." Remus said from next to him. Harry nodded half-heartedly. He knew had done pretty good but he was sorely reminded of the fact that if this was a true down and dirty duel with a deatheater he would be hard pressed to win. How the hell was he supposed to defeat the most powerful dark wizard in the world if he

couldn't fight off your *average* wizard! Granted Remus was a bit more powerful than average.

"Maybe but it wasn't near good enough." He closed his eyes briefly, pinching the bridge of his nose. Remus sighed and gave the younger man's shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

"Don't worry Harry; I know you have the power *and* skill to do it." Harry smiled at him, he only half believed him but he appreciated the vote of confidence. "I forgot, I was supposed to give you something." The man said. He twitched his fingers in the direction of his dark blue robes and they flew from the corner and into his lap.

"How do you *do* that?" Harry asked, the slight awe slipping into his voice.

"The same way you use your wand." Remus shrugged. "You see nearly every wizard or witch has the power to use wandless magic but when you have a wand for so long your magic infuses with it until soon its all you can use. Wands were originally made to help a magical person focus their magic because before there was little control or focus in magic, it was like trying to shoot a gun with your eyes closed. Accidental magic is a prime example of this." He folded his legs under him, getting more comfortable. "Most wizards have completely stopped using wandless magic, deeming it barbaric and unnecessary, by constantly using their wands they have lost touch with their magic. It's extremely difficult to change that, nearly impossible." Harry felt his heart sinking. "*Unless* you have used magic wandlessly after you have already acquired a wand, this makes it easier to get back to your magic, much like having a trail left behind to find your way back. Like when you summoned your wand back to you a little while ago, from the control and focus of the summoning spell you should have very little difficulty using wandless magic though much like silent casting it takes a lot of concentrating." After finishing his little "lecture" the man reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out a crumpled issue of the Daily Prophet and handed it to Harry.

"Why are you giving me this?" Harry asked suspiciously, the last thing he felt like was reading some more trash about him.

“Just read it.” Remus said. After another wary glance at the man he opened the paper. The first thing he saw caused his eyes to widen. Right on the front page was a picture of him, Hermione and Catherine. He had the child in his arms and Hermione was leaning over to kiss his cheek.

Harry Potter: The-Father-Who-Lived?

He suppressed the automatic groan at the headline and forced himself to continue reading the paper.

During a shopping trip in Diagon Alley your's truly spotted none other than the once thought kidnapped Harry Potter shopping in a pet shop with a small child.

The child with her bright emerald green eyes was a dead ringer for Mr. Potter; there was no mistaking her for anything but his child but then who was the mother?

Well this reporter wanted to know so in the pursuit in the truth that all of our readers deserve to know I decided to follow the Boy-Who-Lived and his young charge.

After buying the girl (who I later found out is named Catherine) an extremely expensive rare breed of Kneazle they left the pet shop and I perused them into Gringott's wizarding bank I watched as he was pulled into a vicious fight with another boy named Ronald Weasley.

After escaping by the skin of his teeth Mr. Potter had a goblin escort Mr. Weasley and his family out of the bank. Mr. Potter seemed to be on an extremely important mission and he was flanked by two large security goblins into the back of the bank where I was unable to follow.

After a wait of six anxious hours Mr. Potter left the bank with the child, telling her they were going to meet “Mommy.” He ignored the lustful stares of passing witches, only having eyes for his small daughter.

They went into Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour and headed straight for a young woman hiding in the back of the parlour. She shot out of her chair as soon as she saw Mr. Potter and his daughter and greeted them both with most enthusiasm. As I drew closer, as close as I dared realized that the young woman was none other than Hermione Granger.

You should all remember Ms. Granger from Mr. Potter's fourth year.

A plain girl who was suspected of ensnaring young Mr. Potter with a love potion while he was competing in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. She broke our hero's already fragile heart when she cheated on him with Bulgaria Seeker and hero of the last World Quidditch Cup Viktor Krum who she was also working her devious charms upon.

Miss Granger had also disappeared this summer after an attack on her home which left her muggle parents dead. It seems that Mr. Potter was kind enough to take her in and she once again forced her charms upon him, falling pregnant so he was forced to marry her and take care of her.

We can only hope the Mr. Potter is able to break the spell set upon him by the scheming witch and pull the wool from over his eyes...

Fury roared through his veins. Where the hell did that vile little woman get off calling Hermione any of those things?! There was no way in hell he was going to let her get away with this, with writing that absolute garbage about his family. With a low growl he threw it onto the floor and flicked his wrist and the paper caught fire. Without even blinking Remus sent a small stream of water at the burning paper, extinguishing the flame.

"I told you it'd be easy to do wandless magic." The older man rose stiffly to his feet, Harry doing the same. "I better get going, Tonks is probably worrying." He said, smiling.

"Yeah, I need to be getting to bed." Harry glanced at his watch on his wrist, wincing at the late time. They walked with difficulty down the spiraling stairs and into the family room.

"Bye Cub." Remus said, giving him a hug.

"Later Moony." The man grabbed a pinch of floo powder and right before he made to step into the fire Harry grabbed his arms. "Wait! I needed to ask you something." Remus raised a questioning eyebrow. "Do you remember that locket the Order found at Grimmauld?"

"Yes." A frown was now on his face.

"You don't by any chance know where it was taken do you?" The werewolf's face suddenly became apprehensive and he avoided Harry's gaze. Harry's eyes narrowed and he looked at the man suspiciously.

"What happened?" he asked firmly.

"Well Harry." He shifted uncomfortably. "We had planned on telling you but it didn't seem right at the time...Okay, while we were still having meetings at Grimmauld things began to disappear. You know, silver, books, dishes...we at first believed that Kretcher was taking things and hiding them away but Fred caught Mundungus stealing a silver chalice out of the basement. He was immediately kicked out of the house and Dumbledore erased the memory of the address out of his mind but there were a lot of things we never saw again...including the locket." Remus peered cautiously into Harry's blank face, afraid that he had snapped. "H-Harry?" The teen turned his blazing eyes to him, his lips pressed so tightly together that they were white.

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" his voice was strangely calm and for some reason this scared the man more than it would have if he had been yelling.

"As I said, it never seemed like the right time. We were worried it would just push you over the edge."

"Oh yeah and finding out you lied to me makes it soooo much better!" he took a breath, forcing down his anger. "So Mundungus was

stealing from Sirius and all you guys did was kick him out? Is he still in the Order?"

"He was when Tonks and I quit." Harry sighed again. *"We'll just have that to another reason why I'll have to kick Dumbledore's ass."*

"Do you have any idea where he could be?" Remus nodded thoughtfully.

"A few. He could be hanging around in either the Hog's Head or in Knockturn Alley. You know, its more than likely Knockturn. He likes to hang around in this dingy bar called Crate & Dagger. He finds his best "Clientele" there."

"Ok. Thanks Remus." The man gave him another squeeze on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry about not telling you sooner Harry." He shrugged.

"S'ok. I understand why you didn't." he gave the man a tired grin. "I probably would've hunted him down and beat the crap out of him though I might still do that." Remus laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"See you later, Cub." He stepped into the flames. **"12 Grimmauld Place!"** the fire flared green and the man disappeared.

In the sudden silence of the room Harry let himself lean against the arm of the couch, a sigh flowing from his lips. He was tired. Tired from more than just the dueling. He could feel the familiar pressure of a headache coming on.

With a groan he moved from the couch and trudged up the stairs, quietly making his way into his and Hermione's bedroom. He tip-toed over to the edge of the bed, peering down at the love of his life. The anger instantly melted away. She was laying on her stomach, one hand clutching his pillow and the other resting under her head. Her face looked so peaceful and relaxed. He leaned over and pushed a stray curl from her forehead, placing a soft kiss in its wake.

He readjusted the soft blankets around her body then moved away, grabbing a random pair of pajamas and heading into the large bathroom. The heat of the water soothed his aching muscles and slowly helped relax the stress in his mind. He leaned his head into the warm spray and tried to think clearly.

Did Mundungus still have the locket or had he sold it to some random person he met in a bar? If it *is* actually the Horcrux how was he supposed to destroy it! The thoughts spun round and round in his head, making him confused and wearing him out even more that he already was.

He switched off the water and stepped out of the shower, the cool feeling of the black tiles on his feet helping to clear his mind. He wiped the fog from the mirror and peered at his reflection, gingerly touched the cut on his lip.

“Oh dear what happened to you?!” the mirror said. “You look dreadful!” he glared at the mirror.

“I got irritated and I smashed a mirror.” Silence returned to the room. He bent down and pulled his gray sweatpants and a green t-shirt on.

When he stepped back into the room he noticed Hermione had moved over, back to her side of the bed. He padded over to the huge bed and slipped under the warm covers, Hermione immediately rolled over and laid her head on his chest.

“Ow training?” she mumbled sleepily. He wrapped his arms tightly around her, a small smile crossing his face.

“It was good.”

“Good.” She snuggled closer. After a few minutes he assumed she went back to sleep and his thought began to drift back to the locket. “Did you ask ‘im ‘bout the thing?” he could tell she was struggling to stay awake.

“Yeah. I’ll tell you in the morning, ok?”

“Kay.” She dropped back off to sleep and he pulled her closer, resting his chin on top of her head. He let his thoughts drift away, focusing on the warmth and comfort of the woman next to him, images of Dumbledore and Rita Skeeter burning in hell soothing him. It could wait until the morning.

A/N: Yay! New Chapter! Ok, I know I can get a bit crazy with the cliffs so I'm trying to stop...maybe lol. I know the proposal wasn't extremely romantic but I just can't see Harry doing all that. He's the kind of guy who does things intimately and sweetly.

I can't wait for the next few chappies! It's so awesome to know what's coming next lol. I'm most looking

Chapter 17

“Do you like going to the zoo? Aimes-tu aller au zoo? Let's see all of the animals! Allons voir tous les animaux!” Catherine sung loudly as she stabbed at the eggs on her plate. Harry winced, he loved the little girl more than anyone but by god she had been singing that damn song since she woke up!

“Lots of things for us to do! Beaucoup de choses à faire ensemble! Lots to see at the zoo! Beaucoup de choses à voir au zoo! Lions and tigers, monkeys swinging through the air; elephants and baboons, I hope there are animals everywhere!” He glared across the table at a giggling Hermione. It was her fault they were going through this torture, she had taught her the song. The little girl opened her mouth to start on the next verse when Harry hurriedly interrupted.

“Cattie, love, could you please sing something else?” she chewed a bite of bacon then grinned.

“Nope! Des lions et des tigres, des singes qui se balancent en lair, des éléphants et des babouins, des animaux partout, jespère.” she giggled when Harry began to slam his head repeatedly against the table.

“So, what are our plans today?” Hermione asked. He stopped banging his head and avoided her gaze, biting his lip.

“Well / have someplace I need to go...” Hermione's eyes narrowed dangerously and she folded her hands in front of her, the light from the windows reflecting off of the ring on her finger.

“What do you mean *you* have someplace to go?” he shifted uncomfortably in his seat, still making sure not to make any eye-contact with the girl across from him. Catherine was completely oblivious of the tension around her, focused on her food and still humming her song. He laid down his fork and gave his full attention to her.

“Last night I was able to talk to Remus about the locket. It's not a Grimmauld. Apparently without the knowledge of the great and

powerful Order of the Phoenix Mundungus had been stealing things from the house and selling them.

Fred caught him trying to steal something from the basement and he was then kicked out of the house. Unfortunately a lot of things are still missing, including the locket.”

“What?!” Catherine’s eyes shot to Hermione in surprise, she quickly shot the child a reassuring smile and she went back to her food. “How the hell did that happen?!” she hissed, leaning closer.

“Dumbledore has thieves in his inner circle. Anyway Remus told me a few places where he thinks Mundungus will be. That’s where I’ll be going.”

“I’m guessing these are dangerous places?” her lips were pressed tightly together. When he nodded she looked out of the window, an irritated expression on her face. “Do you think I can’t handle it?”

“What?! Of course I *know* you can handle it I just think its best I do this alone.” He reached across the table and placed his hands over her’s. “Trust me.” She peered into his face for a second the nodded.

“Ok Harry, just be careful.”

“I will.” He said, giving her hands a little squeeze. Catherine pushed her plate away and it instantly disappeared.

“I’m done! Can I go to the library?” Hermione smiled at her enthusiasm.

“Yes.” The little girl grinned in return and bounced out of the room, they could hear her running up the stairs still singing the song.

“Why’d you teach her that?”

“Its always good to know how to speak another language. It’s how my parents taught me.” A sad look entered her eyes and she quickly shook her head, trying to rid herself of the pain that was beginning to return to her chest. She also pushed away her plate and it popped away. “So when are you leaving?” Harry leaned back in his chair.

"I was thinking of leaving right after breakfast." She nodded.

"You're going to floo over to Grimmauld?"

"Yeah, Remus said they'll be there."

"You'll be back by dark?"

"More than likely but I'm not completely sure." She nodded.

"So what do you plan on doing once you find Mundungus?" He took a sip of his pumpkin juice.

"Whatever is necessary." Her eyebrows shot up and she leaned forward.

"Harry..."

"I won't *kill* him 'Mi! I just want to...talk to him."

"I'm sure. Just don't hurt him too bad." He grinned.

"I won't." She sighed and he rose from his seat. H needed to get his shoes and a robe before he could leave.

After heading back up to the bedroom he slipped on his shoes he pulled black robe over his dark blue sweater and jeans. Before he left he went to the library to say goodbye to Catherine.

He found her standing in the care of magical creatures section standing on a stool, trying to reach a book on the very top of a shelf which was extremely difficult as she was only about the size of your average four year old. He smiled as he watched her standing on her tip-toes straining to reach it and he was just about to intervene and get it for her when she sighed in frustration and stepped back onto the floor, she raised her small hand and with a small twitch of her fingers the tome floated down from the shelf and into her arms. Shock went through him, when had she learned to do that?!

She turned from the shelf and spotted him, staring with wide eyes, leaning against another shelf.

“Hi Daddy!” he shook himself out of his shock and forced a smile onto his face.

“Hey Kitty-Cat! How’d you learn to do that?” her head tilted to the side and her curly bangs fell into her face.

“Learn what?”

“How to get the book off of the shelf.” Her cheeks flamed red and she avoided his eyes.

“Well when you said I couldn’t learn magic until I got a wand I started looking through books, trying to find spells without wands...I couldn’t find any so I just tried practicing with my hands and it worked!...I know you said not to but I wanted to *know*!” he ran a hand through his hair in amazement, only Hermione’s daughter would think to do something like that. He sighed and knelt down so that they were eye-to-eye.

“I’m so proud of you for learning that all by yourself Catherine but your Mommy and I told you that for a reason. Magic can be very dangerous if you don’t use it correctly-” her mouth opened to interrupt. “*I know* that you’re smart enough to be very careful and I’m sure you’ve practiced a lot but I don’t want you trying anymore spells unless either Mommy or I am with you.” She nodded miserably, her chin falling to her chest. His eyes instantly softened, he hated seeing her sad. “How about this? If you promise not to do magic by yourself I’ll teach you some new spells.” Her head flew up and she grinned widely.

“Really?!”

“Yep!” she squealed happily and threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you Daddy! I promise!” he placed a kiss on her forehead.

“Good. Now that that’s settled I came up here to tell you goodbye.” Horror filled her face and he could see her lips trembling. “No! It’s ok princess! I’ll be back tonight.” He said, rubbing circles into her back.

“You promise?” she sniffled. He gave her his most reassuring smile.

"I promise." After giving her another hug and kiss he left the library. He jogged back down stairs and into the family room. Hermione was already waiting for him on the couch, her legs tucked under her. She stood up when he walked through the door and crossed her arms in front of her.

"You promise to be careful?" her voice was small and she was biting her lip anxiously. His brow furrowed, worried at her uneasy and scared expression. He stepped over to her and gently took her elbows in his hands, she lifted her head and her apprehensive eyes met his.

"What's wrong love?"

"N-Nothing's wrong, I'm just...I'm just a bit worried that's all." He frowned. He knew what was wrong, he hadn't really left her by herself since he had brought her to the cottage, well except for his meeting with Dumbledore and he knew she had been scared out of her wits then.

"I swear to you I'll be right back Hermione, I won't leave you." He said firmly. She looked back into his eyes, her eyes beginning to fill with tears and her bottom lip trembling.

"Promise?" he had to strain to hear her. He smiled softly at the repeating of the conversation with Catherine.

"I Promise." He leaned over and placed a soft kiss on her lips. She gave him a quick hug before he took a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the fireplace. He stepped into the flames.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" he shot his eyes tightly as the world spun around him, pressing his lips together to make sure breakfast didn't come back for an encore.

He fell out of the fireplace and right into the arms of someone he least expected.

"M-Mrs.Weasley?!" He quickly pulled himself away from her, his hand automatically sliding to the wand in his pocket.

"Hello Harry." She said softly. Her eyes held the sheen on unshed tears and she was looking at him with the utmost apprehension. "Remus said you'd be here." He kept his face completely devoid of emotion, showing no reaction to her sad voice. She shifted slightly and ran a shaky hand down the front of her worn looking robes.

"Where is Remus?" he asked coldly. He wasn't going to forget how she had betrayed them; he had nearly lost his family because of her. She flinched at his tone.

"He is upstairs with Tonks, she feeling unwell again." She smiled softly. The smile quickly slid from her face and she wrung her hands in front of her. "Harry, I'm so sorry." Her voice cracked but she plowed on. "I had no idea he would do something like that! I only thought that he hadn't known where you were and he was as worried as the rest of us...I didn't mean for that to happen!" tears were by now flowing freely down her plump cheeks and her face was open and honest, he knew she was sincere. He felt his heart soften, he was still pissed at what had happened but he knew she hadn't known what was going to happen, she was just another pawn in Dumbledore's game.

"I-I know Mrs. Weasley but I'm not ready to completely forgive you." He sighed. She nodded through her tears, her eyes shining with gratitude and hope. They lapsed into an awkward silence, each not knowing quite what to say to one another. Harry nearly sagged with relief when he spotted Remus and Tonks walking down the stairs.

Remus had one hand under her elbow, guiding her down the stairs. Her usual bright face held a tint of green and she was leaning heavily against Remus's side.

"Wotcher Harry." She said. He met them at the bottom of the stairs and she pulled him into a hug.

"Hey Tonks, how you doing?" she rolled her eyes at his concern.

"I'm *fine*." She shot the werewolf an irritated look and he grinned in return.

"We were just about to have some tea, would you care to join us?" Remus asked. He was about to refuse when he saw the hopeful look

in Mrs. Weasley's face. Inwardly sighing he nodded and followed the couple and the older woman into the sunny kitchen.

They sat in silence while Remus made the tea; Tonks rested her arms on the table and placed her head on them.

"I'm so tired." She mumbled into the tabletop. The Weasley matron smiled kindly and placed a hand on the younger woman next to her.

"Have you been getting exercise? Eating right? I know that's what helped me." Tonks snorted, still not lifting her head.

"I can exercise because I'm too *tired*. I can *eat right* because everything that goes in my mouth comes right back up." She snapped. Mrs. Weasley took her hand off of her shoulder but the smile didn't leave her face, if anything she looked amused. Tonks lifted her head and gave her a sheepish look.

"I'm sorry Molly, I'm just..." she shot a glance at Harry. "Not feeling well." The woman patted her hand.

"I understand." She said with a wink. Remus stepped over to the table, two tea cups in his hands and two more and a platter of biscuits floating behind him. He placed the cups in his hands in front of the two women and floated the rest onto the table.

Harry sipped his tea as they once again fell into silence. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Remus kept shooting Tonks anxious looks and Mrs. Weasley watched them with amusement. Harry couldn't help but grin over the rim of his cup, if there were any doubt before about Tonks's condition it was definitely gone now.

"So." A mischievous grin was on his face. "When's the baby due?" Remus spit out his tea and he began coughing violently, Tonks's head shot up and she stared at him with wide eyes.

"Wh-What do you mean?" she squeaked. He rolled his eyes and sat down his cup.

"Do you really think wouldn't notice?" well technically he hadn't really noticed, Hermione had kindly pointed it out to him. Remus wiped his

face with a napkin and after meeting Tonk's eyes he looked back at the still grinning Harry.

"Well I guess there isn't any reason to deny it." The older man said. A grin lit his face, making him look ten years younger. "The baby should be here in February." Harry's grin widened.

"That's great! I'm so happy for you guys!" Tonks smiled brightly and reached across the table to squeeze his hands.

"So are we! I'm so excited!" and she was. He could see the happiness that shone in her eyes, the gentle flush that decorated her cheeks. Remus's eyes looked near gold and they shone with the same happiness and contentment as the woman across from him.

A small smile graced his features, he was glad to see Remus finally getting the family he'd wanted, and needed. Mrs. Weasley turned her eyes to Harry, an almost nervous smile on her face.

"Speaking of children Harry, you haven't told me about that sweet child you were with." He froze, his eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked guardedly. She was probably here to spy on him for Dumbledore, he should have seen it! Her eyes widened and she raised her hands at his slowly angering face.

"I'm not here for anyone else Harry! I promise!" he forced himself to calm down though he was still on guard, ready to obliviate her if he had to. "I was just worried, you and Hermione suddenly showing up with a child. I just want to know about her, I just want to know if the two of you are ok." Why was it that he could never say no to this woman? He sighed and resettled himself on the stool, folding his arms across his chest.

"Her name is Catherine. She's the child of Hermione and I." The older woman blinked a few times then cleared her throat, forcing a smile onto her face.

"O-Oh. I had guessed when I saw you two in Gringott's but I didn't think I was right." She laughed nervously. "So how old is Cath-

Catherine?" he felt a smile creep onto his face at the thought of his daughter.

"She's six." Mrs. Weasley's eyebrow shot up.

"Six? But that would mean that she was born in your first year!" His lips twitched at her scandalized expression.

"She's adopted." Realization dawned on her face, and slight embarrassment.

"Oh! So she's the child from the attack?" Harry nearly flinched at the memory.

"Yes, she is."

"Oh." She took a sip of her cooling tea. She seemed not to know quite what to say, the table once again dissolved into silence. "Ron has been missing you Harry." He flinched at the name of his former best friend. A pain blossomed in his chest, he had missed Ron...he was his first friend but he had acted like such an ass!

"Really." He sounded bored with the subject.

"Harry." He turned his eyes to the older woman. "You have to know that Ron didn't abandon you or Hermione. Dumbledore forbade him to contact you and after we found out about the attack on Hermione and her family he was ready to rush off and get her. We all were. Dumbledore told us to wait, that he was trying to find the rest of her family. When he finally allowed us to go it was too late."

"Look Mrs. Weasley. I don't want to talk about this right now." He said firmly. He wasn't ready to talk about Ron. The thought of him filled him with anger, with pain and the feeling of betrayal. How could he have just let Hermione stay, alone and hurt, in that horrible place. It wasn't as if they had never disobeyed an order by Dumbledore! They were his *friends* and he had left them. After drinking his tea as fast as he could Harry stood from the table.

"I need to be going..." Remus and Mrs. Weasley quickly stood from their stools. Tonks stood after them but she swayed on her feet,

Remus rushed to catch her before she hit the ground. He moved so fast Harry hadn't even seen him move.

"I'm fine." She said though her eyes were closed tightly and she was leaning heavily on the man holding her up.

"You're not fine Dora! You've been feeling dizzy for *days!*" Remus said his voice sounding frustrated. Mrs. Weasley quickly stepped to their side.

"Calm down Remus, it's perfectly normal for women in their first trimester to feel lightheaded and dizzy." The man sighed and led Tonks into the living room, setting her gently onto one of the cushy couches. He kneeled down in front of her.

"Do you want a glass of water?" he asked softly, brushing a strand of near white hair out of her eyes. She gave him a shaky but loving smile.

"No, I'm ok."

"Are you sure you don't need anything Tonks?" Harry asked. The woman looked at the anxious teen and the Weasley matron hovering near the couch and Remus kneeling in front of her and rolled her silver eyes.

"Is everyone going to do this the entire time I'm pregnant?" The older woman patted her shoulder.

"Yes, dear." She groaned and buried her face into one of the pillows.

"Great." Remus stood up and clapped Harry on the back.

"We'll see you later Cub." He pulled him into a hug. "Kick his ass for me, eh?" he whispered. He gave him a small nod, a grin pulling at his lips. After he was released from the hug he leaned over the couch and gave Tonks a careful hug.

"You're not going to break me Harry." He shook his head and released her. When she turned Mrs. Weasley was standing in front of him wringing her hands nervously.

"I-I guess I'll see you later, dear." He nodded. She seemed to be having an internal struggle; finally she sighed and also pulled him into a motherly hug. "You be safe, Harry. Take care of Hermione and Catherine." Her voice was choked with tears. He let her hold him, his eye slipping closed. He had forgotten how good it felt to have someone hug him like that. When she released him from the hug she took a good look at his face, wincing at the piercing in his eyebrow, thankfully she didn't say anything. She gave his shoulders one last squeeze.

"Take care of yourself."

"I will." He gave them a small wave and walked out of the room and out the front door.

The street was silent as he walked down the sidewalk towards the alley; his thoughts swirled round in his head. *"Was Mrs. Weasley really sincere or was she just playing another game for Dumbledore."* His mind flashed back to her face, the open honesty, the worry and love. She wasn't lying to him; he just didn't think it was something she would do.

Still caught up in his thoughts he stepped into the alley and with a quick glance around him returned his bike back to its original size. Pulling on the helmet and gunning the engine filled him with a profound sense of freedom, when he pulled out of the alley a grin was already on his face.

He sped down the street going the now familiar route to the Leaky Cauldron. He parked in front of the "Record Store" and swung off of the gleaming cycle. Luckily this time he wasn't stopped by anymore officers.

He strode into the dingy looking pub, his hood pulled over his head and casting his face in shadow. The patrons eyed him warily as he strode through the pub.

"Hello, Sir! Can I get you anything?" he didn't even pause when Tom called the greeting. He didn't want to deal with anyone. He tapped his wand on the bricks and stepped through the passage way.

The small shopping town was busy and people stared at him in slight fear and confusion, wary of his appearance. He continued walking; trying to figure out what exactly he was going to do once he got the locket. If it was the one they were looking for how was he supposed to destroy it? It wouldn't be as easy as say blowing it to pieces, from the state of Dumbledore's hand there was no doubt in his mind that it would be incredibly difficult to destroy.

So caught up in his thoughts he ran straight into a small man. Packages flew from the man's arms and he went sprawling to the ground.

"S-So sorry, sir! I meant no ha-harm! I w-wasn't watching wear I wa-was going!" he stammered, hastily trying to gather his scatter packages with shaky hands. Harry bent down and began helping him pick up his things, careful to keep the hood over his face.

"It's quite alright, I wasn't paying much attention either." He said, he had made his voice low and scratchy. He picked up a rather large brown wrapped package and an issue of the Daily Prophet, he was just about to hand it to the still wary man across from him when he noticed the headline.

Minister Fudge: He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named severely weakened after attack at Department of Mysteries.

He is now "No extreme danger to the magical community"

His eyes narrowed. What was that stupid ass Fudge *thinking*?! Not only was he antagonizing Voldemort he was lulling the wizarding world into a false sense of security! If they even believed that utter nonsense!

"Do you mind if I borrow this?" he asked. The man swallowed nervously and pasted a shaky smile onto his face, his wide brown eyes darting around nervously.

"Of-Of course not!" he jumped up and cradled his things to his chest. "T-Take anything you want!" he turned and walked away, practically running down the sidewalk.

His lips still pressed together in anger Harry folded the paper and slipped it into the pocket of his robes. He walked quickly down the sidewalk and to the dark entranceway to Knockturn Alley.

He could feel his stomach turn, if someone recognized him...He waved his hand in front of his face and the shadow of the hood became deeper, completely blocking his face from view.

He stepped into the dark and seedy alley, making sure to keep his head held high and his posture defensive. The sunlight seemed to fade as he walked deeper into the sinister alleyway and he forced down the flutter of apprehension in his belly. He scanned the shops, searching for Crate & Dagger. He winced in memory at familiar dingy window of **Borgin and Burkes**, he was going to continue past it when a thought entered his mind. What if Mundungus had already sold it? It would definitely be in the dark shop.

He crossed the narrow street and stepped into the store. Dim gray light glowed in the eerie shop, it was completely silent, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and a chill went down his spine. He swallowed convulsively when he spotted a shrunken head bobbing around in glass jar, his stomach rolled when it grinned at him and blew a stream of bubbles in the thick yellow tinted liquid.

"Can I help you?" a low voice said from behind him. He turned slowly towards the source of the voice. Borgin Burke stood in the middle of the shop, his hands clasped behind his back and under the curtain of his thatch hair his eyes narrowed.

"Yes actually." He kept his voice cold and emotionless. "I'm looking for a certain piece of jewelry." The small man shrugged.

"You'll have to be a bit more specific, Mr..." Harry stepped around the man and leaned against the counter, deliberately neglecting to mention a name.

"A heavy gold locket. Rather plain looking with an ornate S engraved on the back." Mr. Burke shrugged nonchalantly and stepped behind the counter.

"I might've seen something of that sort a little while ago but my memory is a bit fuzzy." Inwardly sighing Harry reached into the pocket of his robes and grabbed a few galleons he had found in his trunk. He slid the gold across the counter and the man's hand shot out and grabbed them. "Nearly fifty years ago Caractacus was manning the shop when some filthy little urchin girl comes stumbling in with the locket. She claims it's Salazar Slytherin's but why should Caractacus believe her, she obviously poor and ill bred, not to mention pregnant with some little bastard but he examines it and right on the back was Slytherin's signature." He smirked. "I gave her ten galleons for it." Harry's mouth pressed into a thin line under his hood. How could you rip off an obviously poor and needing woman.

"Have you seen it since then?" The smirk fell from the old man's face at his tone and he shrugged again. Harry once again pulled out a few galleons and slid them across the counter. The man gave a greedy grin and snatched them off of the surface.

"Yeah. A few years later I sold it to a woman. Quite a mess she was! She had this large ginger wig on her head, she was as big as a house and wearing these immensely bright pink robes! She stood out quite a bit. She paid quite a hefty sum for the locket."

"And you never saw it again?" The old man shook his head. "*So he didn't sell it, at least not here...I'll find him.*" He gave Mr. Burke a sharp nod and strode out of the shop.

He scanned the narrow alleyway, searching for the pub Remus had mentioned. He continued walking, his thoughts drifting back to the conversation he'd just had with the old man. Once again not quite paying attention to where exactly he was going he almost fell down a small flight of damp stone steps. He straightened and peered down the stairway. It ran into the ground and to an underground room. He leaned forward a bit and saw light filtering out of two small windows and a wooden sign hanging in front of a thick door. **Crate & Dagger.** He grinned, he had found it.

He stepped down into the dank stairwell; he stepped over a puddle of something unrecognizable and stood in front of a low square door. The heavy brass knob was rusted when he turned it and he had to

kick the old wood to get door to swing open. It slid open with a tired creak.

Low voices sounded through the barely lit and smoky bar, dark figure sat hunched over tables and at the bar. No one spared him a glance when he stepped inside. The door swung closed on its own accord behind him. The bartender was a stout looking man with a gleaming bald head and a thick red mustache. He steady wiped small circles in the worn wood bar; he threw a nod in Harry's direction. Harry returned the nod and went and sat at a table in a dark corner of the pub. His eyes drifted across the room, trying to spot the thief. "*He's not here.*" His eyes narrowed in frustration.

"Aven't see ya 'ere before." A voice grumbled from a table next to his. An obviously drunk man with thinning dirty blonde hair sat at the table with a bowl of peanuts in front of him and a mug of firewhiskey in his hands. He didn't answer him. He went back to scanning the pub hoping that maybe he had missed the man.

"Ignorin' me are ye?!" a peanut hit him in the arm. He finally turned and looked at the man.

"Please refrain from doing that before I am forced to harm you." The man just sneered at him. If his brain hadn't been so dulled by the alcohol he might've noticed the warning signals in Harry's tone. He reached into the bowl and grabbed another peanut and threw it at the teen. He laughed when it landed on the top of the hood of Harry's robe. He roared with drunken laughter and grabbed a handful of peanuts and popped them into his mouth.

As soon as the nuts fell into his mouth Harry lifted his hand and waved it in his direction. Suddenly his eyes widened, his chubby hands flew to his throat. He began to choke, his mouth wide and gasping for breath, his skin taking on a pale blue hue. Harry leaned forward and rested an elbow on the man's shoulder.

"You really shouldn't eat so fast, you could choke." He spoke in a casual voice. The man's bleary eyes darted to him, a pleading expression in them. "You can't breath?" he shook his head with difficulty. Harry leaned closer and whispered in his ear. "If you continue to bother me I will be forced to harm you even

more...severely." He waved his hand again and the man pitched forward, half chewed peanuts flying out of his mouth and onto the table. Harry leaned back and settled back in his chair, ignoring the hacking and wheezing sounds from beside him.

As soon as the man was done trying to cough up his lungs he jumped up from the table and stumbled out of the pub, shooting scared looks over his shoulder. As he was stumbling out the door he ran into another man sending him to the ground, he stepped over him and continued running into the stairwell.

"Watch where you're going you bloody drunk!" the second man shouted. Grumbling, the squat man pulled himself off of the ground and brushed dirt from his already filthy clothing. He stepped fully into the pub and Harry could see his face. His teeth clenched and his eyes narrowed. "*Mundungus*."

The now revealed Mundungus walked over to the bar and slid onto one of the wooden stools, quickly ordering a drink. The bartender reached under the counter and slid a bottle to him.

Harry stood from the table and walked over to the bar. When he got closer snippets of the man and the bartender's conversation.

"...Great price. It's a priceless antique! Look at this jewel." He drew even closer and peered over his shoulder. Mundungus was holding a silver dagger. It was about 11 inches with a blade of 7 inches. The handle was made of a strange black metal with a large emerald surrounded in silver in the middle and the blade was made into an S shape. It looked like many of the ornate daggers in the dueling room at home. Anger flowed through his veins when he looked closer and saw the Black family crest etched into the gleaming blade. "...Charmed to never rust or dull. Can cut through *anything*! I'll let you have it for five galleons." The bartender turned the dagger over in his hands.

"I'll take it." His voice was surprisingly high and nasally.

"I'll give you twenty for it." They both turned a Harry's disguised voice. The bartender's watery brown eyes narrowed angrily and he sneered. Mundungus's face lit up and he licked his lips in greed.

"Well alright, sir. Twenty it is!" he reached into his pocket and pulled out a black dragon hide scabbard inlaid with the Black family crest in silver. He slipped the dagger into it and extended a hand to Harry.

"Let's talk about it outside, eh?" Dung's eyebrows shot up but he stood up and followed him out of the pub. He led the man up the staircase and into a dark alley between two other shops.

"So you have the twenty galleons are not?" Harry casually checked to make sure no one was watching the waved his wand at the man. He flew into the air and hit the wall. He slid to the ground and laid there. Harry walked slowly towards him and kneeled down. The man was gasping for breath and staring up at him with wide, scared eyes. He grabbed a handful of his dingy robes and pulled him into a sitting position.

"Hello Dung." The man's bloodshot eyes widened at the familiar voice.

"H-Harry?" he squeaked. Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see his hand fumbling in his pocket for his wand. He flicked his wand again, not wanting to reveal the wandless magic, and summoned it to him. With one deft movement he flung it out of the alley.

"Now, now. We can't allow that." He lifted the small man to his feet and pressed him against the slimy brick wall. "I know you've been stealing from Sirius's house Dung." He paled.

"N-No! I'd never-" he was cut off abruptly when Harry's arm began to apply pressure to his throat.

"Don't lie to me. It makes me very unhappy." He kept his voice calm and friendly. "Now there's something I know you took and I need it back." Mundungus licked a trickle of blood from his lips and his eyes darted around the alley nervously.

"I-I take a lot of things. You'll have to be more specific."

"Gold locket. Heavy and with an S on the back."

"Useless piece of junk." The man grumbled. "Wouldn't even open!" Harry pressed harder on his throat and he gagged.

"Where is it?" the man choked and scratched at his arm. "Do you still have it?" he nodded. Harry released the pressure on his throat.

"Left pocket." He croaked. Still keeping a wary eye on the man he slipped his hand into the pocket of Dung's robes. As soon as his hand was in the pocket his fingers came in contact with a hard piece of leather. He lifted it out. It was the dagger. He slipped the weapon into his own pocket and reached back into the pocket. At first he felt nothing and he was beginning to think that Dung had lied to him, he was about to tear him a new one when he felt a thin gold chain. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach as he carefully pulled it out of the dingy robes. With shaky hands he held it up.

The gold of the circular locket shined dully in the near non-existent light. The chain looked heavier than it felt. He turned it gingerly and there it was. The serpentine S. He nearly laughed. He'd found it! This little piece of jewelry could be the beginning of the defeat of Voldemort!

He released his grip on Dung and he crumpled to the ground, a groan fell from his lips as he already sore back hit the damp flagstones.

"Thank you Dung, you've been a great help." He pointed his wand at the fearful man, he backed into the wall and shivered in fear. "**Obliviate!**" a jet of blue light shot out of his wand and hit the man right between the eyes. The force of the spell sent the back of his head into the wall and he slumped over, unconscious. He gave the man a none to gentle nudge with his foot to make sure he was still alive. When he was sure he hadn't murdered him he turned and made to leave the alley when he saw an unusually bright bug skitter across the wall. "*Wait a minute...I know that beetle!*" before it could get away he once again waved his wand and red light hit the beetle sending it spiraling to the ground. He kneeled down and looked closely at the stunned insect. "**Rita Skeeter!**" grinning, he flicked his wrist at a nearby pebble, transfiguring it into a glass jar. He scooped up Rita and dropped her into the jar. He placed an unbreakable charm on the jar and an air bubble to keep her alive. He flicked his wrist again and the bug began to move. He screwed the lid on tight and lifted the jar to eye level.

“Why hello Rita! I thought I’d have to hunt you down.” He frowned slightly. “Though I was kind of looking forward to that.” He smiled cheerfully. “Thanks you for making my job a bit easier.” Still grinning he slipped the jar in the pocket with the dagger and carefully lowered the locket into another one.

He strode out of the alley and back into the only a bit wider alley. He was preparing to leave the dodgy place when he notice a group of older wizards surrounding a huddled figure on the ground. They were laughing and jeering and throwing spells at the small figure which never made a sound. He glanced at the entrance way then back to the group. “*Damn it!*” he turned and headed towards the group.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!” he shouted. They paused in their “play” and turned to him.

“Minding our own business which if what you should be doing!” A rather large man with a potbelly dressed in finely tailored black robes sneered. Harry raised an eyebrow that they couldn’t see from under his hood and continued walking in their direction. Without bothering to say anything he waved his wand. The fat man flew to the side. The other man stared at him in shock then quickly raised their wands. He dodged a curse and flicked his wand three times in quick succession and three of the remaining men dropped to the ground. There were now only two very nervous men left. The figure on the ground forced themselves, with difficulty, to it’s knees.

“Do you want to continue or would you rather just leave?” he asked coldly. This seemed to anger them even more and the jumped into action. Harry’s eyes widened when what looked like a boulder came out of one man’s wand and flew towards him. He had to dive to the side to avoid it; unfortunately his hood flew off when he did it. With eyes narrowed in anger he jumped back up and shot a rather powerful stunner in the man’s direction. He didn’t even have time to move. The spell hit him in the chest and he went careening into the sidewalk. Harry turned to face the last man he was surprised to find him already on the ground.

The figure from the ground was standing over him with a wand pointed at the man. The sunlight that had managed to fight it’s way

through the gloom was gleaming off of the figure's white blonder head. It turned and Harry's eyes widened in shock and the other person's gray-blue eyes widened in horror.

"Potter?!" he yelped.

"Malfoy?!"

A/N: Oops I did it again! I made another cliffie :P. Anywho thank y'all for reading and reviewing!! Sorry about the long wait but I haven't been able to make myself write but I think I'm getting back into the spirit of it!

I'm not quite sure about the baby being born in February. I'm being a bit lazy and I *really* don't feel like going through this fic and trying to remember when exactly the month is supposed to be, I can't think if it's either June or July. Anyway I'm excited for the birth of the baby (I'm trying really hard not to say he or she!). I know what its going to look like, its name, I'm so excited! Unfortunately it won't be for a few more chapters pout.

Anyway I hope you enjoy this chapter! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 18

"Malfoy?!" The other teen looked worn. Dark bags were under his eyes and a bruise decorated one of his pale cheeks.

"What are you doing here Potter?" he spat. The patented Malfoy sneer was plastered on his face but the effect was lessened by the scared and slightly ashamed look in his eyes. He glared at Harry as if waiting for him to insult him.

"What happened Malfoy?" he asked, gesturing to the crumpled bodies around them.

"None of your business." He turned sharply on his heel and headed down the dark alley. Harry rolled his eyes and was fully intending on leaving the other boy alone when he saw him stumble. His thin arms wrapped around his middle and he squeezed his eyes shut. Harry hurriedly grabbed the back of his robes before he could hit the pavement.

"Are you ok?" he couldn't help the feeling of concern that was creeping up on him. Malfoy had somehow turned three shades whiter and his eyes were still closed.

"I'm" he took most of his weight off of Harry and cracked his eyes open. "I'm fine." As soon as the words left his mouth his eyes closed again and he went limp. He sagged against Harry, completely unconscious. Harry glanced around searching for help, the alley had miraculously emptied and they were alone.

Cursing under his breath Harry pulled the limp teen towards a building and leaned him against the wall. He knelt down and peered into his face. His face was damp with cold sweat, his breathing was shallow and Harry could see a thin trail of blood leaking out of his nose. *"Damn it Malfoy! This is just what I need."* He pressed long fingers against the other boy's neck, noting that his skin felt cold and clammy, and checked his pulse. He sighed in relief when he felt it. He looked around again, what the hell was he supposed to do now? There was no way he could walk around with him slung over his shoulder without someone noticing. *"Maybe I should've brought*

Hermione.” He was just about ready to just leave him or carry him damn the consequences when rational thought finally caught up with his frantic mind.

“How could I forget?!” Feeling rather foolish he waved his hand over Draco and he began to disappear. It looked like it was dripping down his head and slowly covering his body until he had completely disappeared from sight. With another flick of his wrist the unseen body of Draco Malfoy rose into the air.

He floated him behind him and pulled his hood back up. With a deep breath he left the alley.

He stepped into the thinning crowd of Diagon Alley, carefully maneuvering Malfoy so he didn’t accidentally knock him into someone and get them caught. The glass jar in his pocket beat on his leg rhythmically, a smirk made its way onto his face. Hermione had told the woman exactly what would happen to her if she continued writing lies and slandering them, who was he not to fulfill that promise.

He continued walking until he was at the entrance to Leaky Cauldron; he tapped the familiar pattern into the bricks and stepped into the cool courtyard. A feeling of nervousness crept into his belly and his mind flashed back to the last time he was there. His hand clenched in a fist and he forced himself to continue walking.

Once again everyone glanced at him nervously and he saw many people’s hands sliding to their wands. Ignoring them he stepped over to Tom who was wiping down the counter.

“I need a room.” The man turned to him and light glinted off of his sweaty head.

“Course sir.” He limped from behind the counter and gestured for Harry to follow him up the stairs. He led him, and the unseen Draco down a hallway and to a door, he pulled out a ring of keys and slid it into the doorknob. The door swung open without hesitation.

The room was fairly small but a bright splash of sunlight lit the room and a rather large bed with dull gray, slightly moth eaten hangings surrounding it.

"How long will ya be staying, sir?" Tom asked. Harry turned back to the bartender.

"Only about an hour or so." Tom's eyebrows shot up but he smiled his toothless grin and nodded.

"Yes sir, you can pay on your way out." Tom gave him a farewell nod and left the room. As soon as his uneven footsteps faded Harry kicked closed the door and waved his free hand in front of it, it glowed for a brief second then the glow faded. Now no one unwanted would be able to get in. He began to walk towards the bed when he caught his reflection in a mirror, behind him he could see that the charm on Malfoy was fading, they'd made it just in time. He flicked his hand and the other teen floated gently onto the bed

"Well looks like it's just me and you Malfoy. What in the hell am I supposed to do with you?" Malfoy of course didn't move. What little color he had was slowly draining from his face and blood was dried on his lower lip. He was shivering uncontrollably, sweat dripping down his face. He was starting to get worried. He pulled the rough blanket over the shivering teen and tucked it tight around him. With a sigh he pulled the curtains around the bed and left the room.

Before he left the pub he paid for the room, promising that he would be right back. It was getting dark, the sky alight with purples, oranges and blues. The streets were nearly empty as he walked to the apothecary. His nose wrinkled when he stepped into the dank shop, the familiarly nauseating smell of old eggs and rotting cabbage singeing his nose hairs. Trying not to retch he wandered down the aisles looking for healing potions, the shelves were filled with nothing but ingredients.

He had to do something for Malfoy, something was really wrong. Giving up on the shelves he walked over to the counter when an old man sat on a stool watching him.

"Excuse me sir, do you by any chance sell healing potions?" the old man turned bleary gray eyes to him. His eyes were heavy lidded and his face was creased with a lifetime of memories. A mop of wild gray hair surrounded his round face and his mouth was set into a grim line.

"We sell every potion known to man son." His voice was like the sound of rustling leaves. "What are you looking for?" Harry's mind went blank, he knew next to nothing about potions.

"I-I don't know. You see a friend on mine" he nearly snorted as the word slipped out of his mouth. "We got into a bit of a fight with some other wizards and one of them put a spell on him. I'm not sure what the spell was though." The man pursed his lips.

"What are his symptoms?"

"Well at first he seemed fine then I think his middle began to harm him, and then he fainted. After that his nose began to bleed and he was shivering and sweating." The ancient man nodded and flicked his wand towards a door behind him, the door swung open and three glass vials flew out. They all landed neatly on the counter.

"This one" he said, pointing to a vial of dark red liquid "will stop the shivering and cold sweats." He pointed to a second vial filled with a thick looking black liquid. "I've seen this curse before; it basically wreaks havoc on your immune system. This should take the curse out of his blood. And last but not least." He picked up the last vial which was filled with a bright green liquid that seemed to sparkle gently. "This one should repair the damage already caused by the curse." After thanking him Harry paid for the potions and left the shop. He took a large gulp of the fresh air outside, glad to be out of the oppressive smell of the apothecary.

He fairly ran back to the Leaky Cauldron and jogged up the stairs and back to the small room. He couldn't figure out why he was feeling so worried about the other boy, he just couldn't let him die. *"I guess I do have a saving people thing."*

Malfoy was still in pretty much the same position he had left him in. The shivers seemed to have intensified and he had curled into a ball on the mattress. Harry sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his hood off. He gently pulled the other boy into an upright position. He pulled out the dark red vial and pried his mouth open. He poured the potion into his mouth, rubbing his throat to force the potion down. Slowly the shakes in his body calmed and he stopped sweating. Relieved that it worked Harry grabbed the second vial and poured the thick liquid into

the teen's mouth, it slid out like mud. The only obvious change was that some color came back to his cheeks. Finally he picked up the last vial and also forced it down his throat.

Nothing happened at first and Harry was about to stand up when suddenly Draco's body arched off of the bed, his mouth opening in a silent scream. Alarmed Harry grabbed his shoulders and forced the now convulsing boy back onto the bed. He struggled with him for a few minutes until he suddenly stopped. Harry was panting when he finally released him, when he sat up he was met with a pair of guarded and confused eyes.

"Potter?! What the hell are you doing?!" he grabbed the blankets and pulled them up to his chin staring at Harry wide-eyed. Harry rolled his eyes and sat on the end of the bed.

"Calm down Malfoy, I wasn't trying to *molest* you." The other boy gingerly sat up and looked around the room in confusion.

"What happened?" Harry shrugged.

"After your little run in with those wizards you passed out and I brought you here. Happy?" With narrowed eyes Draco gestured to the empty potions vials on the bedside table. Harry shrugged again. "You were in bad shape." They lapsed into uncomfortable silence.

"Why'd you help me?" Harry turned his eyes to the other boy who was gazing steadily out of the small window.

"I might hate the very sight of you Malfoy but that doesn't mean I want you dead." He shifted on the bed. "Why were they cursing you anyway?" All expression slipped off of the pale teen's face and he glared out of the window.

"That's not any business of yours." His voice was as cold as ice and barely restrained fury was heard just below the surface. Harry raised a dark eyebrow.

"Well I think it is as I was also involved in that little skirmish."

"I didn't ask for your help!" he snapped. They fell into silence again, Harry watching the seething boy calmly and Draco glared out the window in anger. Soon the anger faded from his face and was replaced with a weary, bone-tired look. His eyes looked old and he dropped his face into his hands.

"What happened Malfoy?" The other boy sighed and lifted his head, he leaned against the headboard and his eyes took on a faraway look.

"When I got home after the end of the school year my father-

"Your father? I thought he was in Azkaban?!" Draco snorted.

"Surely you didn't think that the Dark Lord would allow him to stay in that hell hole! Any way my father approached me with a proposition. He wanted me to become a death eater. I said yes or course, he had groomed me since I was a child for this." He shook his head and he ran his hand through his once perfectly slicked back hair which was now long and hanging in his face. "He took me to a "meeting" so I could "understand my duties." It was horrible." He shivered. He was wringing his hands, it was as if he was reliving that night. "They-they dragged in these two mud-muggleborn girls and shackled them to a wall. They- they *tortured* them! They didn't just use crucio they used cutting charms and fire charms, they beat them, the even" his face turned green and he whimpered. "They *forced* themselves upon them! Even my father!" his hands flew to his ears and he squeezed his eyes shut as if he was trying to block the images out of his mind. "Their screams! Every night their screams plague me! The most horrible sound I've ever heard! Every time I close my eyes I see them hanging there, blood everywhere, limp, pale." He turned anguished eyes to a shocked Harry. "I couldn't do it. I *can't* do it. No one deserves that." He took a shaky breath. "When we finally got back home I told him I wouldn't take the mark. I told him I would *not* be a *monster*. He was angry to say the least; he beat the hell out of me. He put the crucio on me, told me he'd let it up if I agreed to take the mark. I refused. He kept it up for what seemed like hours, I think he would have killed me if my mother hadn't come down the stairs. She made him stop and somehow convinced him to lock me in my room. It was the only nice thing she's ever done for me. I knew I had to get out; he was going to kill me no matter what. I convinced one of the

house-elves to let me out and I snuck out. I was only able to grab my wand. I caught the Knight Bus and ever since then I've been living in the back of a pub in Knockturn Alley."

"D-Did no one know you were there?" Harry asked. He was still in shock over Malfoy's confession.

"An old woman. She'd bring me food at night and extra clothes." He seemed embarrassed about the help she gave him so Harry changed the subject.

"So what about those men?"

"I was stupid. I left the pub. I had a couple of knuts in my pocket and I wanted to go buy something new to wear." Harry snorted and the other boy shot him a look. "I know, it was stupid. Anyway apparently everyone had been alerted about my "treachery" and as soon as they spotted me they decided to show the "blood traitor what happens when you turn your back on the Dark Lord." I didn't have a chance."

"So what do you plan on doing now?" Harry asked after a short bout of silence. Draco shrugged.

"I haven't really thought that far." Harry nodded absentmindedly. *"I can't just leave him here, not with all his father's "friends" looking for him. Why the hell do I even care what happens to him? He's not my responsibility."* He looked at the worn boy in front of him, he had went back to staring out of the window. The dark purple bruise on his face stood out sharply on his pale skin and from the way he was leaning on the headboard he was still weakened from the curse. He knew there was no way he could leave him to fend for himself, he just couldn't understand why he felt the need to watch over him in the first place! This had nothing to do with him! But he was alone now, he needed someone. He cursed whatever divine power that had decided that it should be him.

"Look Malfoy, I have something I need to take care of then I'll take you someplace safe." Draco's gray-blue eyes shot to him in surprise then they narrowed.

"I don't need your charity Potter." Harry rolled his eyes and stood up off of the bed.

"It's not charity Malfoy." He turned and looked him square in the eyes. "I just want to help. You can leave if you like and I'll forget you were ever here." Before he could answer Harry pulled his hood back up and left the room. *"If he's gone when I come back I'll let it be."*

He left the inn and turned and headed down the sidewalk to a small shop at the end of the street. When he pushed open the door the sound of soft hoots and rustling reached his ears.

"Hello sir, welcome to Eeylops Owl Emporium." A bored voice said from a corner of the dim store.

"Can I borrow one of your owls to send a package?" An older man with closely cut brown hair shrugged and gestured towards a line of caged owls on a wall next to him.

"Do you have any boxes I can use?" The man gave a long suffering sigh and pulled a brown box from off of a shelf and half threw it at him. Throwing the man a glare from under his hood Harry took the box and stepped over to the owls, he selected a small tawny colored owl. He placed it on his shoulder and reached into his pocket, pulling the glass jar out of his pocket. He once again moved the jar so that it was eye-level and gave the bug a rather evil smile.

"Remember Rita. Don't ever mess with my family." He knew she probably couldn't hear him but he didn't really give a damn. He put the jar, none too gently, in the box and turned back to the man who was staring at him as if he had gone absolutely bonkers.

"Do you have any spare parchment?" the man started and reached behind him to the shelf, never taking his eyes off of Harry, and pulled down a small roll of parchment and a self-inking quill. He leaned forward and handed them to Harry. With one hand he quickly scrawled a short note.

Mr. Weasley,

Found this while shopping, I think we have a bit of a Peter Pettigrew situation.

-Harry

He folded the note, hoping the Mr. Weasley would understand and wrote on the back.

Arthur Weasley,

Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, Ministry of Magic

Central London

He tied the note to the package and tied it to the owl's leg. It flew out of a small window near the ceiling and he watched it until it disappeared from sight.

"Thank you." He said to the man. He gave him an absentminded nod and he left the shop. The sun had nearly completely disappeared by the time he made it back to the pub. He gave Tom a short nod and headed up the stairs. When he opened the door to the room Malfoy was sitting on the bed, his back to the door.

"Are you ready?" he chose not to comment on his decision to stay. Malfoy turned to him warily.

"Where are we going?"

"Don't worry about it." Malfoy's eyes narrowed and his arms crossed. He opened his mouth to protest but Harry cut him off.

"We don't have time for this Malfoy. Are you coming or not?" he glared at Harry for a second then turned back to the window. He took that as a yes. "Ok, I think I'll have to put the disillusion charm back on you so we can leave." He looked at the other boy thoughtfully. "I don't want it to stay too long though, you need to be seen where we're going."

"It's not that difficult Potter. Just put less power into the spell." "Of course."

"You're not going to tell me where we're going." Harry sighed; he should have known he wouldn't drop it so easily.

"The muggle world." Malfoy reeled back in shock, his eyes wide with horror and disgust.

"The muggle world?! I can't-I can't go into the *muggle* world! It's absolutely swarming with those filthy creatures." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Would you stop it?! We aren't *staying* there!" this seemed to calm him a bit but he was still muttering under his breath about "filthy mudbloods" and "barbarians"

He tapped his wand on the top of the other teen's head, muttering the spell as to not reveal his new "techniques" to him.

It was disconcerting to watch. It was as if he was slowly melting out of sight. When he had fully disappeared they left the room and headed down into the near empty pub. A few people sat around nursing drinks or have snacks before heading to their rooms. They hurried out before the spell began to wear off; Harry had put as little power as possible into it. After bidding farewell to Tom Harry led the invisible Draco out of the door, he could see his feet beginning to reappear.

The streets were even more crowded than they were when he had entered Diagon Alley earlier; his bike stood gleaming exactly where he had left it.

"We aren't riding on that contraption are we?" the sneering voice of Malfoy said from behind him. He turned and was glad to see that the charm had already faded.

"It is not a *contraption*. This is a work of art!" The other boy just continued to sneer at the bike. Harry pulled the two helmets out of the compartment and handed one to Malfoy. He looked at it disdainfully.

"Do you expect me to wear this?" he held it hanging from one finger.

"You could wear it or have you brain splattered all over the pavement. I could tell you which one sounds more appealing to me." He swung

onto the bike and pulled his own helmet on. Grumbling Malfoy pulled his on and slid onto the bike after him.

He gripped Harry's shirt as they sped down the street, he cursed profusely every time he'd swerve around a car. Harry made sure to do this frequently. When he finally pulled into the alley Malfoy nearly vaulted off of the bike.

"Work of art my arse!" chuckling Harry replaced the helmets, quickly shrinking the bike and putting it in his pocket.

"Stay here, I have to make sure it's safe." Malfoy crossed his arms and glared.

"I am not a *child* Potter. And I don't take orders from you." Harry pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I wouldn't treat you like one if you didn't act like one!" A flush appeared on the other boy's cheeks and he opened his mouth. "Would you please just shut up for a second?!"

"Tell me where you are taking me." He demanded.

"Look, I'm taking you to stay with a couple of friends of mine. One is one of your relatives. Happy?"

"What relative?"

"Don't you ever stop asking questions?!"

"When I get answers." Harry ran a tired hand through his hair.

"I promise you'll get them when I get back." Draco eyed him for a moment then nodded. He left him leaning against the wall in the dark alley and headed down the sidewalk. He knocked sharply on the door, tapping his foot impatiently.

When the door swung open a healthier looking Tonks stood in the doorway, her brows furrowed when she took in his agitated expression.

“What happened this time?” she asked, gesturing for him to come inside. He stepped into the brightly lit home and Tonks led him to a couch. Remus was sprawled across another couch with a thick book in his hands; he looked up when they walked in.

“Hey Harry, I expected you to be back sooner.”

“I ran into a bit of a complication.” He quickly explained to them about his little run in with the wizards and Malfoy’s confession.

“I was hoping you two could do me a favor?” he shifted uncomfortably on the soft couch.

“Let me guess, you want him to stay here right?” Remus asked. He nodded sheepishly. Remus sighed and clasped his hands on his knees.

“Look, Harry-”

“I think it’s a good idea.” Tonks’s voice interrupted them. Remus looked at her with wide eyes.

“What?!”

“Yeah, I think it’s a good idea. He needs someone to watch over him and we could use the practice for the baby.”

“He’s a *teenager*. Not a baby.”

“Same thing. We feed him, make sure he takes a bath, and deal with his temper tantrums...Same thing. And plus he *is* family.” Her voice became softer. “From what Harry told us there are probably dark wizards out there waiting to get their hands on him. If any of them, let alone his father catches him they will kill him. I can’t let that happen.” Her voice was still soft but her eyes were fierce. There was no way anyone could change her mind now. With a resigned sigh Remus turned back to Harry.

“Where is he?”

“That’s the spirit, love!” Tonks exclaimed.

“He’s waiting out in the alleyway.”

“Well go get him!” Tonks grabbed his arm and pulled him off of the couch.

He fairly jogged down the sidewalk and back to where Malfoy was waiting. He had sat on the ground and tucked his knees to his chest, his forehead resting on them. His head shot up when Harry stepped closer to him; he could see his hand shoot to his pocket where his wand must have been. He quickly jumped to his feet, not wanting Harry to see how weak he was actually feeling.

“Took you long enough.” He sneered. He looked ready to drop, his eye lids heavy.

“Shut up Malfoy. Let’s go.” They walked in silence toward the large house. Harry was about to walk up the steps when he noticed Malfoy was still standing on the sidewalk looking around in confusion. He slapped himself on the forehead and walked back over to the other boy; he leaned close to his ear ignoring his flinch.

“The location of the safe place is 12 Grimmauld Place.” He watched as the other boy’s eyes widened as he caught sight of the impressive house. It was impressive. Tonks and Remus had painted it a bright white trimmed in a soft green. It looked warm and inviting. There was a slight awed look on Malfoy’s face before he quickly masked it with a blank expression.

They walked up the stair and before Harry could knock the door swung open and Tonks pulled them both in.

“Wotcher Draco, welcome to our home.” A large smile was on her pretty face but you could sense the nervousness in her voice. Malfoy stared at her blankly, not really recognizing her. He saw the color of her hair and the bright gray of her eyes that reminded him of his mother, of himself but...he didn’t know her.

“...Thanks?” Tonks blushed slightly.

“I guess you don’t remember me, well of course you don’t you’ve never met me. I’m your cousin Tonks.” Recognition colored his face.

She was the half-blood child of his Aunt Andromeda. She saw the way his lips automatically pulled into a sneer and the smile disappeared off of her face, replaced by a small frown. The air was thick with tension when Remus finally stepped into the entrance way. The sneer dropped from Draco's face and his mouth dropped open in shock.

"What are you doing here?" he asked rather rudely. Remus raised a cold eyebrow and stepped closer to Tonks, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"I live here." Malfoy ran a hand through his already wild looking hair, this was just too much! First he's attacked by the very people he'd known since he was a child, then Potter the Gryffindor prince saves his life, and now he was supposed to live with a mudblood masquerading as his cousin and a half-breed?! There was no way in hell he was going to stoop that low.

Seeing the resistance in his face Tonks looked him directly into his troubled and tired eyes.

"Where else do you think you can go Draco? Rather you like it or not this is the safest place for you and like it or not *I am* the only family that you have at the moment." There was a silence as Draco and Tonks stared into one another's eyes. Draco was the first to break eye-contact.

"Where am I sleeping?" he asked grudgingly. Tonks favored him a small smile and led him into the living room, Harry and Remus following behind. Malfoy wouldn't even spare the werewolf a glance.

She led Draco up the staircase, shooting them both a reassuring look over her shoulder.

"Well, I can tell this is going to be a fun time." Remus muttered as soon as he was sure they were out of ear-shot.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't know where else to take him." Remus turned to him and gave him a half-smile.

"It's alright Harry, I understand. So did you find Mundungus?" he plopped down on one of the couches and Harry sat in a chair across from him.

"Yes, and I got the locket." He gestured to the pocket of his robes. He didn't dare to pull it out of his pocket.

"Did you kick his ass?" a smirk dominated his face.

"Yep." He launched into a more detailed rendition of his time in Knockturn Alley.

They were laughing about his treatment of the drunken man in the pub when Tonks descended the stairs alone. She sunk down onto the couch next to Remus and laid her head on his shoulder with a tired sigh.

"Where's Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"He's in the guest room. He was bone tired and I think he needed some time alone."

"Are you guys sure you want him to stay here? I mean..." Tonks turned her silver eyes to him.

"Harry...even if I haven't ever seen him he *is* my family. He may not see it yet but now that he has denied the mark he has no one left, they have all abandoned him." She leaned forward. "The fact that he denied it in the first place shows me that he really isn't an evil boy, he just didn't know. The same goes for his prejudices; those are things he has been taught since he was a small child. I can't fault him for the way he was raised." Her eyes turned to the man next to her and she threaded her finger through his. "Remus and I want to be there for him, even if he doesn't want us to be." They lapsed into comfortable silence. Harry checked the black watch on his wrist; it was a bit past 8. He had missed Catherine's bedtime.

"I have to get home; Hermione's going to kill me." The older couple chuckled and stood up along with him.

“How are you and Hermione?” Remus asked a playful grin on his face. Harry opened his mouth to tell them they were doing well, that they were planning on getting married when he stopped himself. He and Hermione had agreed to tell them together.

“We’re doing really good.” Remus clapped him on the shoulder.

“That’s great.” He pulled him into a short hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He said when he had released him. Tonks gave him a warm hug.

“See you later Harry.” He grabbed a pinch of floo powder and threw it into the large fireplace. After giving them another wave he stepped into the green flames and shouted the name of the cottage. He closed his eyes tightly as he spun, trying not to think of where he was.

When he was finally spit out of the flames he landed rather ungracefully on the cool wood floor of the family room. A smile drifted onto his tired face, he was so glad to be home.

He left the silent room and headed up the stairs, planning on going to his and Hermione’s bedroom to take off his robe then going to check up on Catherine when he heard the sound of muffled voices and soft giggles coming from the direction of the little girl’s room. He kicked off his shoes and walked quietly down the hall and to the slightly ajar door of the child’s room. He nudged the door open and peered in, a grin creeping onto his face.

Hermione was standing in front of the far wall of the large room dressed in her favorite pair of long blue pajama bottoms and a long-sleeved white shirt. Catherine stood next to her in silky pink pajama bottoms with little crowns on them and a long-sleeved white shirt with the word “Princess” scrawled in pink curvy writing on the front. They were hanging pictures on the wall, Trouble lounging on the fluffy rug in front of the fire.

Along with the pictures of Catherine and her family now hung newer pictures of her and Harry and Hermione. There were pictures of the day they had their little picnic, Harry tickling her, Hermione holding her on her hip and spinning her around, Harry chasing her through the lush grass of their backyard, Catherine laying on her stomach watching a butterfly sitting on a blade of grass. There were also the

pictures they had allowed the child to take, one of him and Hermione sitting on the wicker swing, a few of the butterfly, a picture of Hermione by herself waving at the camera. Nearly the entire wall was covered with pictures.

"Well you two have been busy." They both started at his voice and Catherine quickly turned and ran to him.

"Daddy!" he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms.

"Hey Kitty-Cat! Why aren't you in bed?"

"I told her she could stay up until you got back." Hermione had walked closer to them. She stood on her tip-toes and placed a kiss on his cheek. "And now that he's back you have to go to bed!" the little girl pouted and wrapped her tiny arms around Harry's neck.

"Do I have to Daddy?" her voice was sugary sweet and she looked up at him with those wide green eyes of hers.

"Yes princess, you do." She sighed loudly and her pout became more pronounced. He carried her to the bed and placed her onto it, he pulled the soft covers around her and kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, love." She sat up so she could kiss his forehead.

"Goodnight Daddy." She giggled. Hermione smoothed her wild hair away from his face and rubbed her nose against his.

"Nighty, night Cattie."

"Nighty, night Mommy." They extinguished the lights and left the room. As soon as they were out the door and they had closed it behind them Hermione pulled him into a kiss.

"I missed you." She murmured breathlessly into his ear. He grinned down at her.

"I can tell." She slapped him on the arm and walked into their room he following behind. His shoes were placed neatly next to the bed. She sat on the bed and patted the spot next to her, he sunk onto the soft bed.

“So did you get it?” he nodded and pulled the locket out of his pocket and spread it on the bed. They looked down at the small piece of jewelry in silence. This little gold locket could be the beginning of the demise of one of the most feared dark wizards of all time. “Do you-Do you think that it’s the one?” Hermione asked softly.

“I don’t know...” he shrugged again, at a loss.

“If it is how are we supposed to destroy it?” she picked it up and wrapped the chain lightly around her fingers. He ran a tired hand over his face. There was no way they were going to figure it out tonight.

“I have no idea. Maybe we can look up something in the library tomorrow...for now we need to put it in a safe place.” Hermione nodded in agreement. “Manny!” there was a small pop and the older elf appeared in their bedroom.

“What can Manny do for you Mistress and Master?” Harry gave him a kind smile. They had been trying for ages to get the elves to call them by their names but the absolutely refuse to do so.

“Is there somewhere you can put something very valuable where you know nothing can happen to it?” Hermione asked.

“Oh yes! In the panic room there is a room that holds a large safe where’s we keep all the precious things.” Harry handed him the locket.

“I need you to put this there. Be very careful with it, it could be very dangerous.” The elf nodded solemnly. “Thank you Manny.” The elf nodded again and popped out of the room.

“Well I guess that’s taken care of for the moment.” Harry said, stifling a yawn. Hermione nodded and lay back on the bed.

“So, what happened today?” with a wary sigh he laid down next to her and launched into the full story of his day, including his treatment of Mundungus. Hermione didn’t comment on it.

When he finally finished his story he could tell it was getting quite late and Hermione’s yawns were becoming more and more frequent. He took a quick shower, pulling on a random pair of pajamas and slid

into bed next to her, extinguishing the light. He barely had enough strength to pull the blankets around them he was so tired. They were going to need their sleep, tomorrow was going to be quite an eventful day.

He had only been asleep for a few hours when he heard a beeping. He sat up quickly, his eyes flying to the crystal dragon on the bedside table. Hermione stirred and she too jumped up, he placed a calming hand on her shoulder.

"It's ok, I'll check on her." She nodded and dropped back onto the pillows. He slid out of bed and crossed the room, slipping out of the door and into the dimly lit hallway.

Catherine was curled up against her headboard when he walked in, her little sniffles and small sobs reached his ears and he gently sat on the bed. She immediately climbed into his lap.

"What's wrong, love?" he asked, gently rubbing her soft curls.

"I-I had a bad dream." She sobbed into his chest.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she shook her head. He pulled her closer to him and leaned his back against the headboard. He rocked her softly and murmured reassuring words into her ears. Seeing that she still wasn't calming down he began to sing.

Sleep my child and peace attend thee,

All through the night

Guardian angels God will send thee,

All through the night

Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,

Hill and dale in slumber sleeping

I my loved ones' watch am keeping,

All through the night

The song flowed into him from somewhere in his memory, the words and tune familiar and calming to him.

Angels watching, e'er around thee,

All through the night

Midnight slumber close surround thee,

All through the night

Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,

Hill and dale in slumber sleeping

I my loved ones' watch am keeping,

All through the night

As his voice faded into nothing he felt the soft even breathing of the child on his chest. With a soft smile he placed a small kiss on her forehead and laid her back on the bed. He tucked the blankets tightly around her.

"Sweet dreams, princess." He tip-toed out of the room and after taking one more look at the now peaceful child he closed the door and headed back to his room.

A/N: Wow. That was the fastest I've ever written a chapter! I figured I didn't need to add the destroying of the horcrux to this chapter. *Maybe* it'll be next chapter, I'm trying not to start promising things again lol.

Anyway I hope Malfoy's reactions and Harry's reasoning's weren't too OOC, I had at first intended for him to stay with Harry and his family but it didn't quite fit. I think he's better with Tonks and Remus though. Anyway thank all of y'all for reading and reviewing! Even if I don't answer them I read every single one and I love them all!

Chapter 19

"Daddy." Harry groaned and rolled over, pressing his face into his pillow. Someone poked him in the side and he could feel someone breathing on the back of his neck. "Get up Daddy!" this was followed by another poke and a small giggle. He cracked his eyes open and he was met with a pair of bright emerald green eyes.

"Cattie?" he croaked. "Why are you waking me up so early?" he glanced around the room. Pale sunlight filtered through the curtains, the sun couldn't have been up for too long. Hermione had already gotten up but she was still in her pajamas and she was curled up in one of the cushy chairs in front of the fireplace, from her tired expression Catherine must have graced her with the same wakeup call. The little girl was sitting on Hermione's side of her bed, her chocolate brown curls tumbled down her back and over her pajamas and a happy grin was on her face.

"I'm hungry." She said simply. With an inaudible groan he checked his watch; it was 6:00am! He was struggling to stay awake. After getting back to his room last night he had been up for hours trying to think up a way to destroy the horcrux. If it was indeed the horcrux that is. His eyes slipped closed and he rested his head back on the pillow, fully intending on going back to sleep. He heard the child next to him sigh heavily and she snuggled close to him, sliding under his arm so her head was resting on his pillow. She giggled and kissed his nose, he cracked one eye open.

"Come on Daddy, it's time for breakfast!" he looked down into her shining face and he was lost. With a heavy sigh he sat up, bringing the little girl with him.

"I'm up!" he placed her on the floor. "Go get dressed and then we'll have breakfast." She nodded happily and skipped out of the room. As soon as she was gone he laid back on the bed. With a tired chuckle Hermione dragged herself out of the chair and plopped down next to him, laying her head on his chest.

"She's been trying to wake you up for half an hour." She murmured, a soft smile on her lips and her eyes closed.

"Why is she up so *early*?!" he groaned. She giggled.

"She said she had a good dream last night and she was hungry." With a reluctant sigh she lifted herself out of Harry's warm embrace and walked towards the wardrobe, pulling out a pair of jeans and black sweater. She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door. Still feeling tired Harry pulled himself out and bad and pulled some dark jeans and white button-up shirt out of the wardrobe.

"So what happened last night?" Hermione shouted over the running water of the shower. Harry pulled off his bed shirt and pulled on the white shirt.

"She just had a bad dream, I tucked her back in and sung her a song. She dropped right off." He leaned against the wall next to the bathroom door and kicked off his pajama bottoms.

"You sung her a song?" she giggled. He was glad she couldn't see the sudden blush on his cheeks. "That's so sweet!"

"I guess." He pulled on his jeans. The water stopped running and Hermione stepped out, waving her wand to dry her hair.

"I wonder how Malfoy is doing?" she was smirking and she pulled her hair into a ponytail.

"He's probably still throwing a fit about having to live with Remus. Hopefully Tonks hasn't cursed him too bad." They left the room and were heading towards Catherine's room when she came bounding out, she nearly ran into Hermione's legs.

"Oh! Hi!" she was wearing a pair of khaki pants and a purple and gray striped jumper. Her feet were bare and her dark curls framed her face. She put her hands on her small hips. "Are you two ready yet?" A smile tugged at his lips.

"Yes, we were just coming to get you!" Hermione said, scooping the child into her arms.

"Good because I'm hungry!" They headed down the stairs and into the dining room. The sun was rising high into the sky and bright

golden light streamed through the large windows. Hermione placed the little girl into a chair and sat beside her, Harry sliding into a chair across from them. Plates of bacon and waffles and fresh fruit appeared in front of them, Catherine's had a bit more fruit than their's and a few celery sticks were on the side. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Do I have to eat these." She flicked one of the green vegetables.

"Yep." Harry popped a grape into his mouth. They went through this nearly every meal time.

"I read a book about a girl whose parents let her eats sweets every morning for breakfast! How come I can't?" her puppy dog look was turned on full fledged but on this rare occasion it didn't work.

"Because she had completely different parents. Now eat your food." Hermione said, pouring orange juice into a glass and sliding it closer to the little girl. She sighed heavily, the pout turning into a sulk and speared a mandarin orange, popping it into her mouth. After swallowing she turned back to them.

"Since you're my parents now is my birthday still the same?" she asked. Harry and Hermione exchanged horrified looks. They had never even bothered to ask her when her birthday was?!

"O-of course you birthday is the same!" Hermione told her. "When, when is your birthday honey?" she winced as the words came out of her mouth. The little girl didn't seem offended at all by the question.

"August 5th." They nearly sagged with relief, at least they weren't such horrible parents that they had missed her birthday.

The rest of breakfast was a rather quiet affair, both Harry and Hermione still half asleep and Catherine trying to eat her food as fast as possible, as if trying to rid as many of the fruit and vegetables from her plate as fast as she could. As soon as everyone was finished and the plates had disappeared Hermione sent Catherine to her room to work on her arithmetic (she had decided that since she wouldn't be going to school they needed to teach her)and they headed to the library.

“Do you have any idea on what it is we’re looking for exactly?” Harry asked, looking around at the rows and rows of book shelves.

“Not really, we’ll just have to pick up anything that sounds remotely helpful.” With that in mind they began their search.

It was slow going, everything seemed useful when you didn’t quite know what you were looking for. By the time an hour had past they had each collected quite intimidating piles of books.

“Let’s take a break and go through these.” Harry said, hefting his pile onto a table. Hermione nodded in agreement and placed her books next to his. They plopped down across from each other at the table, Harry looked at the piles of thick tomes and sighed inwardly. *“It’s going to be a long day.”* He picked up the nearest book and began to read.

Two hours later and they had gotten nowhere. Harry ran a tired hand through his hair and pushed **Defense Against Dark Artifacts** aside. It had looked promising but unfortunately it was no kind of help, he was about ready to take a break when Hermione gasped.

“I found something!” he jumped up from his seat and ran around the table so he could peer over her shoulder.

“What did you find?” his heart was beating a rapid tattoo in his chest. She picked the book up with shaky hands and began to read.

“The first war of “Good and Evil” between wizards lasted over three hundred years. Thousands were slaughtered and many more were left orphaned and injured.

The “Evil” side or the Dark Wizards had forged a weapon out of the bones of threstals and the souls of dementors. No one knows what exactly the weapon was but it was called a weapon of ultimate evil. It could kill entire armies with one fail swoop. The light wizards fought bravely but they could not prevail over the weapon until finally a small group of powerful wizards decided to put a stop to it.

Exactly four wizards gathered together in a graveyard for the young, sacred ground, with them they carried four plain silver swords. They laid the swords in the shade of an ash tree and stood in a semi-circle, no one knows what truly happened during the ritual but when it was finished the swords were changed.

The hilts were made of pure gold and sacred runes were said to be inscribed upon the blades. The swords were given to the most powerful of light warriors and they were sent into battle, they defeated the dark wizards and with the blades they destroyed the weapon of evil.

After the battle of The Sacred Blades all of the surviving members of pure-blood families were forged sets of daggers in the design of the Sacred Blades, all inscribed with runes and said to be enchanted with amazing power. They are believed to be able to destroy dark objects....” Hermione snapped the book closed her eyes wide with excitement. “If this is true your family *must* have a set of those daggers.” He grabbed her face and kissed her soundly on the lips.

“Have I ever told you that I love you?” He asked a grin on his face.

“Yes but I’d love to hear it again.”

“I love you.” He rained kisses on her face causing her to giggle. He released her. “Manny, would you please come here.” the elf instantly appeared in the bright room.

“What can Manny do for you, sir?” he asked respectfully.

“Manny, I need to know if my family owns a set of Sacred Daggers?” the old elf pursed his lips thoughtfully then nodded firmly.

“Yes. The Potter family owns a full set.” An excited grin made its way on Harry’s face and Hermione was practically bouncing out of her chair.

“Where are they?” she asked.

“They are in the safe. With all of the Potter Family treasures.” Harry stood up, Hermione standing with him and tucking the book under her arm.

“Could you please take us there?” The elf nodded with a smile and gestured for them to follow him out of the library. He led them up the stairs and to the third floor. They expected him to lead them down the hallway towards the dueling room and conservatory but he stopped in front of Bronson’s portrait which was at the moment empty as he was sitting next to Caterina. The elf rapped sharply on the gold frame, it seemed to quiver for a second and then it smoothly slid open revealing a dark hallway. After a quick glance at one another the two teens followed the elf into the entrance.

As soon as their feet met the cool marble floor light flooded the hallway. The ceiling was high and large iron chandeliers hung from them, casting golden light onto the gleaming white marble floor. The walls were also white, trimmed with gold, and large marble pillars lined the hallway. Dark red roses climbed the pillars and on one wall was a fountain of a large dragon resting on a smooth stone with water coming out of its mouth and flowing into a small pond.

This was definitely not what they had expected.

“This used to be a ballroom.” The high voice of Manny said, pulling them out of their amazement. “Your grandfather built the panic room as he called it and turned this into a leading way to it.”

At the end of the hall stood two high white stone doors. Manny led them to the doors and turned to the larger of the two.

“This is the safe.” He pointed to the other door. “This is the room that your grandfather called the “Panic Room”. He said this is where the family is to go in case of an attack.” He waited until they nodded in understanding then he gestured for Harry to step forward. “Place your hand on the door and request entrance.” Harry stepped closer to the door and placed his palm flat against the cool smooth surface.

“May I enter?” For a split second it seemed as if the door warmed under his fingertips but it quickly returned to its cool temperature and swung open without protest.

The inside of the room was nothing like he expected. He had been expecting a safe like the ones in the muggle movies instead he was confronted with a large, brightly lit, room filled with shelves. On one side of the room what looked like jewels were tucked into small shelves in glass cases, on the other side were shelves full of aged scrolls. Harry could see Hermione's eyes light up in excitement.

"What's in those scrolls, Manny?" she asked. The elf walked over to them and touched them reverently.

"These scrolls hold the entire history of the Potter family. Every major event, marriage, birth, death, it's all written in these scrolls. They are the most treasured artifacts in the Potter family." Harry stepped closer to them, not daring to touch them. He could find out everything about his family. *Everything!* He forced himself to walk away from them, this was not what they were there for.

At the far end of the room they found what they were looking for.

There was a low stone table leaning against the wall. Over the table hung ancient swords in ornate scabbards and shields with the Potter crest decorating them. The crest was a large shimmering silver dragon curved around an ornate gold P. In his mouth he held a golden star and his tail was curled around a sword. On the very center of the stone table was an old looking wooden box. The elf pointed a finger at the box.

"This is where the sacred weapons are kept." He said. Harry met Hermione's eyes, seeing the same apprehension and excitement he was feeling reflected in her orbs. Together they stepped towards the box and Harry gingerly placed his hands on the thick gold latches. It opened smoothly at his touch and both he and Hermione gasped at the sight before them.

Four gleaming silver daggers rested on a bed of white velvet. The hilts were made of some sort of white substance with gold threading through it. At the very center of the hilt the Potter crest was engraved in gold. The blades of the weapons were inscribed with strange runes, each blade with different runes. The blades looked both delicate and deadly, both threatening and beautiful and the pulsed with some kind of unseen power.

With shaky hands Harry reached into the box and grabbed the hilt of one of the dagger. The air rushed from his lungs and his fingers came in contact with the cool weapon, something that felt like cold fire shot up his arm and flowed into his chest. He ripped his hand from the dagger, panting for breath.

He felt Hermione's warm hands on his cheeks and he tore his wide eyes away from the weapons and looked into her worried face.

"Harry? Are you okay?" she asked and she released his face.

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine." He licked his suddenly dry lips. *"What the hell just happened?"*

"What happened?" Hermione was still looking at him worriedly. Harry furrowed his brow and he looked back the weapons laying innocently on their bed of velvet.

"I'm not sure...it was like this rush of power. It was strange...but not unpleasant." A strange excitement was burning in his eyes and his fingers itched to hold the blade again. The feeling that sliced through him as he held the weapon left him feeling cleansed. Like his very being had been cleansed of all the small aches and pains that had always plagued his body, his mind felt sharper and he felt a new energy running through his veins.

Hermione leaned over the table to study the gleaming daggers, careful not to touch them. She squinted at the runes inscribed on the blades of the daggers.

"I recognize this one." She said pointing to a rune on the blade Harry had held in his hand. "It's a healing rune!" her eyes swept over the other daggers. "They all have different properties. Healing, purity, strength, and..." her fingers ghosted the last blade. "Destruction."

"I think these will work." Harry said, a small smirk appearing on his face.

Three hours later they were standing in the dueling room with the locket spread out on top of a table. The daggers were laid out in front

of it along with the book that had explained the origin of the daggers. In the back of the book was a ritual that was done to use the daggers.

They had chosen the dueling room as it was the only room in the house that could withstand an extremely large burst of magic. They had sent Catherine outside with DeeDi just in case; they couldn't risk anything happening to her.

At the moment Hermione was waving her wand in complicated patterns over the locket. Truthfully they had no idea whether it was actually a horcrux so Hermione, being the smart witch that she is, had found a book in the Potter's vast library on how to detect magical objects. There was nothing pertaining specifically to detecting horcruxes but she had found a spell on how to detect magical objects and the level of power the contained.

She flicked her wand over the jewelry and it admitted a bright red glow the swirled with a sinister black. The entire necklace seemed to pulse with some dark power and the sight of it sent chills down both their spines.

"Well." Harry said with a wary smile. "I guess we know now."

"Yeah." Hermione chuckled nervously. He reached across the table and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. She met his eyes and smiled in thanks.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked, swallowing hard. Fear and nervousness filled his stomach with butterflies. Hermione didn't seem to be in much better shape than he was. She was biting her lip and though her eyes were filled with determination her hands were shaking. They had no idea what to expect. She took a deep breath and straightened her back.

"Yes." Without another word they both took up a dagger, Hermione with Purity and Harry with Destruction. Their power rushed through them leaving them feeling slightly disoriented and giddy. After taking deep breaths they began the ritual.

As with most ancient magic the ritual required blood. At the same time the raised the daggers, the light from the torches around the

room glinting off the gleaming blades, and slid them across their palms. Ignoring the pain in their hands they watched as the blades seemed to absorb the blood that gushed from the wounds. A soft white glow began to issue from the weapons as the first droplets of blood seeped into the runes, it intensified as more of the droplets entered the blade until the light became so bright that they were forced to close their eyes.

Soon the light began to fade to a dull glow and they opened their eyes. The blades seemed to have turned gold and the runes were pulsing with soft white light. The wounds on their hands had healed without leaving a single mark.

“Ok Harry, we have to do this at exactly the same time.” Hermione said. Her brow was furrowed in concentration. They raised the daggers until they were directly on top of the locket.

“One...” He steadied his breathing and took a firmer hold on the pulsing dagger.

“Two...” He looked down at the still pulsing locket, his resolve strengthened. He was taking to first step in defeating Voldemort, of ending this all.

“Three!” as soon as the word left her mouth she plunged the daggers into center of the locket.

It was like slamming into a brick wall. It was surprising the blades didn't bend on contact. Painful vibrations flowed through their arms and into their chests but they didn't release their holds on the weapons. The dark aura from the locket seemed to gain more intensity and the pulsing became stronger. The pure white light of the blades glowed brightly, clashing with the dark red and black of the locket. Finally something changed, the pure white light seeped into the darkness on the locket and it began to shake. Harry placed his other hand on top of the hilt, he was barely able to hold on and from the corner of his eye he could see Hermione in the same predicament. He wanted to call out a reassurance to her but his teeth were clenched so tightly together he couldn't get a word out.

The air around them rippled with magic and the smell of melting iron and the nauseating scent of sulphur invaded their senses. The daggers slowly began to penetrate the locket. The deeper they went in the more intense the pulsating light became and the more they mixed. The white light from their blades grew even brighter and the dark aura of the locket began to lighten, the black turning to gray and the red into pink. Soon both colors faded into the same blinding white that came from the sacred blades, the light grew brighter and brighter until they were forced to close their eyes against it. The hilts were getting harder and harder to hold and Harry felt like someone was burning his hands, sweat was pouring from his body and soaking his t-shirt, he knew soon he'd have to let go. He was about to do just that when it all finally came to a head.

He felt it before it happened. The shaking suddenly stopped but the light continued to pulse, for a split second the rippling of the air ceased and then the light expanded, completely engulfing the room and they were thrown into the air. *"This is going to hurt."* Was his last thought before he was slammed against the stone wall.

The air rushed from his lungs as he hit it. He sat stunned on the ground trying to see where Hermione was but the light was so blindingly bright he could barely keep his eyes open. The feeling of the magic from the blades rushing over him was infinitely better than it had been when he had just held them, the impact of the wall should've left him in extreme pain or unconscious but instead he felt absolutely invigorated. His blood seemed to be rushing faster through his veins, his breathing easier, and his skin was tingling from the raw power the emanated from the blades.

After a few minutes, which felt like hours to him, the light grew dimmer and the orb began to shrink. The light became smaller and smaller, dimmer and dimmer, absorbing back into the blades that were now on the floor. He could finally see Hermione who was leaning against the opposite wall with the same look of amazement he knew was on his face.

When the light was finally gone he was able to see the full extent of what had happened. The table where the locket had laid was completely incinerated leaving nothing behind but ash and a black

mark on the floor. The books that had been on the table were flung on different sides of the room. The daggers were laying in the center of the burned mark gleaming as if they had just been polished and they were still glowing slightly. What really caught his attention was what was exactly dead center of the mark. What was once Salazar Slytherin's locket was now nothing more than a tarnished gold chain. The locket had been completely destroyed leaving nothing but the chain and a lingering smell of sulphur.

"Are you ok?" Harry asked as he walked over to Hermione who was standing to her feet.

"Yeah." Her voice sounded slightly breathless as she brushed the dust from her clothing. "Yeah, I'm fine." They walked over to the middle of the room and knelt down next to the charred spot. Hermione reached out with a hesitant hand and picked up the chain which promptly broke into pieces in her hands.

"Well we definitely destroyed it." She said dryly. Harry looked at the broken chain in her hands then to her face and suddenly burst into laughter. Hermione stared at him incredulously but a smile was tugging at her lips. He had no idea why he was laughing but he couldn't stop! Soon Hermione joined in with soft chuckles that quickly turned into guffaws, they laughed until their chests hurt and tears were streaming down their faces.

"Why are we" Harry gasped between laughter "still laughing?" Hermione just shrugged in her breathless giggles.

Once they finally calmed down, though a giggle would still escape their lips every once in a while, Harry carefully placed the daggers back into the wooden box with the rest of them and Hermione cleaned up the mess they had made. She slipped the remaining pieces of the locket into her pocket and vanished the mark from the floor. It looked as if nothing had happened, if it wasn't for the magic that still seemed to brush their skin and the lingering stink they might've believed that.

"What *is* that smell?" Harry asked, his nose wrinkled in disgust. Hermione took an experimental sniff, cringing slightly.

"It smells like sulphur." She pursed her lips in thought. "It was probably the locket. It is said that dark spirits and demons leave the smell of sulphur or sulphur residue. I guess the locket was kind of inhabited by a dark spirit?" he looked at her in amazement. It never ceased to surprise him how much she *knew*! Hermione once again looked around the room, a slight frown marring her face. "I don't think destroying the rest of the Horcruxes will be nearly as easy."

"I know." He sighed, the full weight of it all entering his mind. Now that they had done this there was simply no turning back. Hermione squeezed his hand.

"We can do it Harry." Her voice was soft but full of determination. "Together." He smiled down at the young women in front of him, eternally grateful for someone as strong and loving as she was. He pulled her into his arms and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Yes, together."

When they finally made it downstairs DeeDi was coming into the house with a reluctant Catherine behind her. Through the windows they could see that it had started to rain.

"I'm sorry Master and Mistress! It was beginning to rain and the little miss-" Hermione held up a placating hand and gave the elf a warm smile.

"It's quite alright DeeDi! We're glad you brought her in, we wouldn't want her to catch a chill." The elf nodded in solemn agreement. Catherine bounded over to them, her ball under one arm, and grinned up at her parents. A smile bloomed on Harry's face and without hesitation he scooped the little girl up. He knew he spoiled her a bit but he couldn't help it! She was his little girl. The grin on his face became wider when she placed a sound kiss on his cheek.

"Did you have fun?" he asked. She nodded happily.

"Yep! But then it started to rain." She pouted slightly and glared out of the window at the rain. Her face brightened. "I'm hungry, is it time for lunch yet?" Hermione smiled at the little girl and pushed a stray curl out of her bright face.

"I think now would be a good time for lunch." She said. The child beamed at her and Harry placed her back onto the floor. She fairly bounced up the stairs to take off her muddy purple shoes and put her ball away. Harry and Hermione followed DeeDi into the dining room where she snapped her fingers and a meal of soup and sandwiches appeared on the table. After they thanked her she popped out of the room. Not two seconds later Catherine padded into the dining room and climbed into a chair next to Hermione. They all dug into their food.

The rest of the day was spent lounging around the house just enjoying one another's company. Finally the sun was going down and it was time for Catherine to head to bed. She put up her usual fight and as always she lost.

After checking his watch and seeing he still had a few minutes until Remus was to come he followed Hermione, who was carrying Catherine, to her room. He waited on the bed while Hermione went with her while she took her bath and got ready for bed. When they returned, Catherine in a soft white nightgown with little pink roses embroidered on it, Hermione tucked her in and rubbed noses with her and Harry placed a kiss on her forehead.

"Goodnight Kitty-Cat." He whispered as they stood to leave.

"Wait!" The little girl twisted her soft blanket between her hands. "Will you-will you sing me the song again Daddy?" her voice was soft and she looked up at him pleadingly. How could he deny her?

"Of course, lovely." She squealed happily and snuggled down into her covers as Harry sat next to her.

"Can Mommy listen too?" she asked. Harry turned and grinned at Hermione who was smiling down at them.

"Only if she wants to."

"Of course I do!" Catherine smiled wider and patted the spot next to her. Hermione climbed into the bed and leaned against the headboard, Catherine snuggled close to her side. Harry brushed a stray lock of dark hair out of the child's face and began to sing.

His low voice wrapped around them, soothing their minds and feeling them with a feeling of comfort and security. Soon both Catherine's eyelids were becoming heavy as she fought the inevitable, the little girl fell asleep but Harry continued to sing until the words faded. They sat in silence watching the child sleep.

"That's a beautiful song Harry." Hermione said softly, running her fingers through Catherine's curls.

"I haven't heard it in years." The both flinched, hands flying to their wands at the gruff voice behind them. They relaxed when they saw Remus leaning against the doorframe.

"Remus! When did you get here?" Harry asked while slipping his wand back into his pocket. He could go without it but it was a habit to automatically reach for it. The older man stepped fully into the room and came to stand by them, looking affectionately down at the sleeping little girl.

"Not too long ago, I was waiting downstairs when I heard you singing." Harry fought down a blush, the only people who had ever heard him sing were Hermione and Catherine. Remus grinned at his embarrassed expression. "Luckily you inherited you mother's singing abilities and not you father's." the smile disappeared from his face, quickly replaced by a small frown, his amber eyes becoming sad and a faraway look entering them. "I remember your mother used to sing that song to you all the time."

"Really?" Harry leaned forward, he rarely got to hear things about his mother. Remus smiled at him sadly.

"Yes, she had a beautiful voice. I remember every time she'd go to put you to bed she'd sing you that song. We, James S-Sirius and I, used to follow her into your nursery and sit while she sung." He chuckled. "She used to refuse to sing while we were there, she hated an audience but after a while she got used to it." He shook his head and forced a smile on his face. "Enough of memory lane. Are you ready Harry?" the teen nodded and stood from the bed, leaning over to place a kiss on the slumbering child's head and a kiss on Hermione's cheek.

"Night, 'Mi." he followed Remus, who gave Hermione a small wave, out of the door.

"So, how's Malfoy?" Harry asked. Remus's usual calm expression changed into a slightly evil smirk.

"He's recovering."

"He's still weak from that curse? I thought the affects would've faded by now." Remus's smirk changed into a scowl.

"Oh he was fine the next day but Tonks cursed him." Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"What'd he do?"

"That little son-of-a!" he took a calming breath. "Tonks thought it best that he knew about the baby. The spoiled little snob called it a "Mongrel" and a "Half-breed freak of nature." She blew him clear across the room." His lips twitched at the memory. "He was out cold for the rest of the day."

Laughing, they continued their trek to the third floor in comfortable silence. They waved to Bronson and Caterina and stepped into the dueling room. Remus wasted no time in discarding his robes and sliding into dueling position.

"Ok Harry, today we're going to try something a bit different." He flicked his wrist and the room was plunged into darkness.

"What the hell happened?!" he heard a low chuckle from behind him and he turned quickly. He knew the man was behind him but he could see nothing, the darkness was too deep.

"You need to learn how to rely less on your eyes, Harry." Before he had a chance to think he was stunned.

"*Damn it.*" He thought angrily when he cracked open his eyes. He glared up at the ceiling, it had been a long time since Remus was able to stun him so easily. Said werewolf appeared in his line of vision, a smirk clearly visible on his face. Without a word he reached

down and offered Harry a hand up. He was still scowling when the older man pulled him to his feet.

“And what was that supposed to teach me?” he grumbled. Remus smiled pleasantly.

“Well for one thing I was trying to show you that you can’t always expect to be able to see your attackers. You have to know how to sense those around you.” Harry calmed himself down and nodded.

“Ok. How do we start?” Remus grinned and once again flicked his wrist, sending the room once again into complete darkness.

All was silent, he could hear nothing more than his own breathing. He had no idea where the other man was.

“Where am I Harry?” Remus voice sounded. Harry flinched, he couldn’t tell where it was coming from.

“I-I don’t know.” His voice sounded small and hollow in the darkness. He tried in vain to peer though the darkness but he could see nothing. His breathing was becoming harsher, the complete darkness was filling him with an irrational fear.

“Stop looking with your eyes Harry.” He bit his lip, forcing down the slight panic that was beginning to claw its way into his chest, and calmed his ragged breathing.

He tried listening for Remus’s breathing but he could hear nothing. He was beginning to doubt he was there at all. Trying to keep his mounting frustration at bay he closed his eyes and slowed his thoughts, focusing only on the room and the task ahead.

He stood in complete silence for what seemed like hours, slowly letting his mind and body adjust to the darkness. Soon everything became clearer. Even though his eyes were still closed he could see where everything was as clearly as if his eyes were open and the light was on. It wasn’t even really seeing, he could just *feel* it, like a cool wind upon his skin.

The very stones of the walls and floor seemed to pulse with power, a soft blue light, and right behind him was Remus. He couldn't see him but it was like a warm wind at his back, burning but not painful.

In a flash he turned around and grabbed the man's arm.

The lights came back on and he was met with the grinning face of the werewolf.

"Not so difficult is it?" he asked pleasantly. With a snort Harry released his arm.

"Piece of cake."

It was nearly 2m when Harry finally dragged himself into his and Hermione's room. After he had found Remus the man had forced him to go through it again and again. They worked on slowing his response time so that he could adjust to the dark in seconds instead of taking the near hour it took him the first time. He hadn't completely been able to just slide into it but it only took him about ten minutes to do it. Remus had then proceeded to shoot spells at him to see if he was able to dodge or block before they reached him, usually he was exceptional at it but with the darkness he had taken quite a few hits. He had always thought himself above average in defense but today his pride had taken quite a beating.

He had expected Hermione to be asleep when he stepped into the dim room but instead he found her leaning against the headboard with her knees drawn to her chest and her chin resting on them, she was staring into the fire with a faraway look in her eyes. She started when the door shut behind him and her head snapped his direction.

"There you are! I thought you'd be to bed hours ago." She said softly, a strained smile on her face and her eyes sad.

"What's wrong 'Mi?" her smile faltered slightly.

"Nothing's wrong, I'm fine." He frowned and stepped closer to the bed, sliding in next to her.

“Mi, I know something is wrong. Tell me.” The smile completely disappeared from her face and she wrapped her arms around her middle.

“I-I was just thinking about...about Ron.” He froze, a sudden pain flaring in his chest. It had been such a long time since he had allowed himself to think about his former friend.

“Why” he cleared his throat. “Why were you thinking about Ron.” Her bottom lip began to tremble.

“I *miss him* Harry! No matter all that has happened he’s still our friend!” he flinched at her words.

The truth was he missed Ron too. He missed how he could always lighten the mood, make him smile when he was feeling depressed. He missed playing chess and quidditch with him and he missed their adventures. He even missed his explosive temper and how clueless he could be. But...he remembered how jealous and angry he had been at Gringott’s, how jealous he was all the time! How he hadn’t written to him when he *knew* how depressed and lonely he was.

“I know Hermione but we can’t just let it go! Forgive him!” she reached out and grabbed his hand, peering into his face.

“I know and that’s not what I’m saying we should do, at least not now...I just-I just miss him. I miss the boy who was our best friend.” Tears had leaked from her eyes and were now flowing down her cheeks. He reached up and brushed them away, allowing her to bury her face in his chest.

“Me too ‘Mi. Me too.” He murmured into her hair. Maybe one day they’ll try to fix things with Ron, try to save their friendship before it was gone forever but right now, right now he had to worry about his family. He had to find the horcruxes and destroy them.

They might’ve been able to destroy the locket but that was only the first step. He was going to end this.

A: Well not my favorite chapter but I think it was still pretty good. I hope the destroying of the locket wasn’t *too* simple.

Thank all of y'all for reading and reviewing! Sorry for the long update but life has been catching up to me. Hopefully the next chapter won't take as long but we'll have to see!

Chapter 20

The rest of the month passed quickly and soon it was August. Catherine was getting more and more excited as her birthday neared.

At the moment they were sitting at the breakfast table the morning before her birthday listening to the little girl chatter on about her upcoming day.

"I want it to be as fun as Daddy's birthday!" Harry grinned when he remembered the day...

When he woke up that morning he was a bit confused. Usually Catherine woke him up at ungodly hours in the morning but that day he had been alone, even Hermione was gone.

With a slight frown he slipped out of bed and padded to the wardrobe and pulled out some jeans and a green shirt then headed to the bathroom. The sound of the shower was the only sound in the entire house.

The eerie silence continued as he walked down the stairs and towards the dining room. A frown made his way onto his face when he didn't hear the familiar sound of Hermione telling Catherine to eat her food or the child singing one of her songs.

Still feeling confused and slightly wary he stepped into the dining room.

"SURPRISE!" he started, his hand flying up and automatically creating a shield. He stared wide-eyed at the people assembled around the bright room.

Hermione and Catherine were standing in front of a large banner reading 'Happy Birthday Harry!' in flashing gold letters. Streamers hung everywhere and a large chocolate cake stood in the center of the table.

He lowered his hand and let the shield fall.

"What-What's all this?" he asked. He looked around the room in wide-eyed wonder, he had completely forgotten! Catherine bounded towards him and lifted her arms, he scooped her up.

"Do you like it Daddy?!" she asked excitedly. "Mommy said it was your birthday so I thought we should have a party!" his face relaxed into a grin and he gave the little girl a hug.

"I love it. Thank you sweetheart." She beamed and returned the hug.

"You're welcome Daddy!" he placed her back on the floor and opened his arms to Hermione who was leaning against the table smiling at them.

She pushed off from the table and stepped into his arms, wrapping her slim arms around his neck.

"Happy birthday Harry." She whispered in his ear, placing a kiss on his cheek. He pulled her closer, burying his head in the nape of her neck, his eyes suddenly beginning to sting.

She had no idea how much this meant to him. He had never really had a birthday party, at least not one he could remember.

"Thank you." His voice was strained with unshed tears when he spoke into her ear.

"You're welcome." He slowly released her and she led him towards the table, Catherine bouncing alongside them. She pushed him into a chair in front of the cake and flicked her wand, sixteen lit candles appeared on it. Catherine jumped onto his lap.

*"Make a wish Daddy!" he looked at the beaming little girl on his lap, the grinning Hermione next to him and smiled. What could he wish for? He had what he had always wanted, a true loving family. **"I wish that we can always be this happy."** He blew out the candles as Hermione and Catherine clapped.*

"What'd you wish for?" Hermione asked.

"If I tell you it won't come true." He answered, winking at her. She pouted and Catherine giggled. There was a pop and DeeDi appeared in the room.

"Happy birthday Master Harry!" she gushed, her beady eyes bright. He smiled warmly at the elf.

"Thank you DeeDi. Especially for the beautiful cake." She beamed, a blush showing strangely on her gray skin.

"T-Thank you Master Harry, it no trouble." She snapped her fingers and the cake was cut into large, neat slices and floated onto plates in front of the small family. She smiled again and popped out of the room.

Catherine's eyes lit up and she dove into the cake with vigor. Harry grinned and joined in as Hermione looked at them with her nose wrinkled, though a smile was tugging at her lips.

"You look like Ron eating like that!" she said, watching as he shoved a rather large forkful of cake into his mouth. Ignoring the slight twinge of pain they both felt at the mention of their friend he flicked a small piece of cake at her, it hit her squarely in the nose.

*The grin slipped off of his face when he saw her lips press tightly together and her eyes narrow as she glared at him. **"Ok, maybe that was a bad idea."***

"I'm sorry Hermione! I shouldn't have done-" his apology was cut off abruptly when a piece of cake hit him in the eye.

He slowly reached up and wiped the cake from his face, a mischievous grin slowly creeping onto his face. Without taking his eyes off of the girl across from him he picked up the entire slice of cake, she began edging away from the table. Catherine's hands flew to her mouth as she tried to stifle her giggles. Hermione pointed a finger at him as she edged towards the door.

"Don't you dare do it Harry!" he pasted an innocent look on his face which contrasted with his widening grin.

“Do what?” before she could run he let the cake fly. She shrieked and tried to dodge the flying confection but it still hit her in the shoulder. She grabbed her cake and he ran to the other side of the table and went to grab another piece of cake when Catherine stood up and placed her little hands on her hips, a stern expression on her face.

“Stop! You’re going to make a mess!” Harry turned to Hermione and they shared an amused glance then Harry’s mischievous grin returned full-force. He lifted the cake in his hand, Hermione caught on and she stepped closer.

Before the little girl could register what they were doing they had both dumped their cake right on top of her head. She squealed and burst into giggles.

In less than ten seconds cake was flying everywhere, the room was filled with shrieks of laughter and giggles. They were covered in cake and frosting, as were the walls and floor.

“No!” Hermione yelled as Catherine lobbed a handful of the chocolaty mess at her. She tried to run behind the table but she slid and knocked into Harry sending them both tumbling to the ground and into the mess on the floor.

Laughing Catherine jumped on top of them and smeared the cake in her hand into Hermione’s hair.

“Got you Mommy!” she giggled.

“So what do you want for your birthday?” Hermione asked Catherine, pulling him out of his memories.

The little girl speared a piece of waffle and popped it into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“I don’t know...I have everything I want!” she was right. Harry and Hermione spoiled her rotten, she already had tons of books and toys, everything your average child could want.

Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Can I have a unicorn?!” Harry nearly choked on his orange juice.

“Um, love...Unicorns can't be pets.” He said. She pouted at him.

“*Please Daddy!*” she begged. “*Look at that face- What am I thinking?!*”

“I'm sorry Cattie but no.” her face fell. Hermione was giggling behind her hand. She saw him almost give in, that little girl had him wrapped around her little finger.

Her face brightened.

“Can I have a snake then?!” Hermione dropped her fork.

“What would you do with a *snake*?!” she asked incredulously. Catherine blushed and looked down, looking suddenly nervous.

“W-Well I think...I think I can talk to snakes.” Her voice dropped to a near whisper at the end. Harry and Hermione exchanged shocked looks. She was a *Parseltongue*?!

The little girl's cheeks darkened, taking their shock for disbelief. “I know, it's silly...it's impossible to talk to snakes-” Harry reached over and took her hand, cutting her off mid-rant.

“We believe you, luv.” She looked at him doubtfully. “No really. You see...I can talk to snakes too.” Her delicate eyebrows shot up.

“Really?” he smiled at her excitement.

“Yep. It's called *Parseltongue*. Very few people can do it. It's a rare and special talent.” Hermione interjected.

“Oh. Does that mean I can have a snake?” her eyes were bright and she was clearly excited.

“I don't think-” Hermione began.

“We'll see.” Harry interrupted. The little girl squealed and bounded out of her chair, she threw her arms around his neck and then Hermione's.

"Thank you!" she fairly skipped out of the room. When she was out of earshot Hermione turned to him with narrowed eyes.

"We'll see?" he smiled sheepishly.

"I couldn't say *no*."

"Harry! Snakes are *dangerous*! She's six years old!"

"It won't be dangerous Hermione. Not if she can talk to it, it's really not any different from having a cat." She sighed in exasperation and shook her head.

"We *are not* getting her a snake." He sighed heavily. She was right, no matter if she could speak to them you can't give a six year old a snake. But she'd be so disappointed!

"Then what can we get her?" he asked, leaning forward on his elbows.

"Well we can't get her anymore toys, I doubt we have enough room...Maybe a puppy?" she shrugged. Harry shook his head.

"No, she already has trouble." The girl across from him winced at the name. The kneazle was definitely living up to his name.

Not only has he taken to trying to tear up the curtains but he found it to be great fun to chase the house-elves. He also had a profound fascination of Hermione's hair, every time she was close to the ground he'd bound out of some unseen corner and attack her curls. She had developed a rather strong dislike for the troublesome animal. Hermione wasn't the only one he had taken to trying to attack, he was hell-bent on eat Hedwig even though the bird was bigger than he was.

Harry took a sip of his pumpkin juice, staring down at the tabletop thoughtfully. Hermione tapped her fingers on the table, causing the light to reflect brightly off of her ring. Harry's eyes lit up, he knew what to get her!

He jumped out of his chair and grabbed Hermione's wrist, pulling her out of the room.

“What are you doing Harry?!” she asked as he pulled her up the stairs.

“I know what we should give her.” He said excitedly. By now they had reached the door to their bedroom. He pushed it open and stepped inside the sunlit room, still dragging Hermione behind him.

He let her hand go and jogged towards the wardrobe and flung the door open. He pushed the clothes aside and grabbed his bag, his face lighting up.

“What are you looking for?” Hermione asked as he dug through the bag, she knelt down next to him and peered curiously into the bag.

He dug deep into the bag, knowing it was down there. He grinned when he felt his fingers touch the cool case. Every so slowly he grasped the case and gently pulled it out of the bag. Hermione gasped when he pulled the case out.

The light from the windows hit the crystal case sending rainbow colored lights dancing across their faces and clothes. The simple beauty of it shone even more in the bright light and it seemed almost wrong that he was holding it so casually in his hands.

Almost with reverence he stood up and placed it on the table in front of the fireplace.

“I was-I was saving this.” He said softly as they once again knelt onto the floor in front of the shining crystal case.

With hesitant hands he reached out and lifted the lid, it opened smoothly, without a sound.

“Oh my.” Hermione’s voice was barely a whisper. She gazed in wonder at the glittering necklace laying in its bed of velvet. She watched as he reached into the case and carefully lifted the necklace out of its cradle, as light streamed from the windows and glinted off of the exquisite piece of jewelry, as the heart twirled gently from the delicate chain. “Where did you-*Where did you get this?!* ” she asked breathlessly.

"It's been in my family for many years. My great, great, great grandfather had it made for his wife." With his free hand he reached and took her hand in his, running his thumb over the ring on her finger. "This ring is apart of a set. It's called the *Cor Cordis Ab Munimen*."

"The Heart of Protection." He grinned. Even in her awed state she couldn't pass up an opportunity to flaunt her intelligence.

"Exactly." He fingered the smooth contours of the heart pendant. "I thought it'd be a perfect gift for Catherine." He looked down at the piece of jewelry in his hands, he had been planning to give it to Hermione for her birthday but...it *belonged* to Catherine. He could feel it.

With gentle, slightly hesitant, hands Hermione reached out and took the necklace from his hands. She smiled down at the delicate piece of jewelry in her hands.

"You're right. It's the *perfect* gift for her!" she exclaimed. He grinned at the happiness on her voice.

She carefully placed it back into the crystal case and closed the lid. When she turned back to him a grin was on her face and her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"Now..." She flicked her wand and a roll of parchment floated out of one of the drawers on the large mahogany desk in the corner and landed on her lap. With another flick her favorite sparkly pink pen joined it. "Time for party plans!" he suppressed a groan, if he knew Hermione this was going to take a long time.

The day of Catherine's birthday she woke them up three hours earlier than usual, the sun had barely risen over the horizon.

Hermione was snuggled close to his side, her head resting on his chest and an arm slung around his waist. One of Harry's arms was also around her waist and his chin was resting on her head. They both had been deeply asleep, completely unawares of the little girl sneaking into their room.

She carefully pushed the door open and tip-toed inside. Harry shifted closer to Hermione, his foot sliding off of the side of the bed and the child hit the floor, afraid he had woken up. When she saw that he was still asleep she crawled on her tummy closer to the bed. Holding in her giggles she reached up and tickled the bottom of her Daddy's foot, it twitched and he moved it away. She covered her mouth with her hand to keep herself from laughing and waking them up.

She got to her knees, brushing her curls out of her eyes, and peered over the edge of the bed at her sleeping parents. With a wicked she stood up and jumped onto the bed.

They jumped a mile high, wands and hands up and spells on the tip of their tongues. The only thing that stopped them from casting anything was the laughter of the little girl at the end of the bed. She was clutching her sides and laughing, every once in a while she'd lift her head to say something then catch a glimpse of their bemused expressions and it'd send her into another round of uncontrollable giggles.

"Good-Good morning!" she managed, once her giggle had calmed slightly. Her laughter stopped completely when she saw the narrowed eyes of Harry and Hermione. She squeaked and turned to run but Harry grabbed her ankles and pulled her towards them. Hermione pounced, mercilessly tickling the little girl's sides and she shrieked and tried to squirm out of Harry's grip.

"I got you now!" Hermione teased.

"S-Stop!" Cattie sputtered between her laughter.

"What? I can't hear you!" Harry sing-songed. "Was that an apology?"

"I-I'm-I'm sorry!" she gasped. Hermione released her and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Happy birthday Cattie!" the little girl sat up on her elbows and grinned up at them.

"Thank you Mommy." Harry pulled her into his lap and placed a kiss on her temple.

“Happy birthday Kitty-Cat, how does it feel to be seven years old?” he asked. She rolled her eyes at him.

“The same way it feels to be six.” He growled playfully and tickled her side.

“Cheeky.” she giggled and stuck her tongue out at him. She jumped out of his lap when he made to tickle her again and she quickly scooted close to Hermione. Harry mock scowled and stuck out his own tongue, Hermione rolled her eyes at them and shook her head in amusement.

“So what do you want to do first?” She asked the child snuggled next to her.

“Breakfast!” Hermione grinned and picked her up, then placed her on the floor.

“Anything you want! But, go get dressed first.” The little girl pouted for a second then shrugged and skipped out of the room. As soon as she was gone Harry and Hermione flopped back onto the bed.

“It’s six am!” Harry groaned. Hermione threw an arm over her eyes and sighed.

“It’s her birthday.” With obvious reluctance she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, she stood up and walked over to the wardrobe, her bare feet slapping against the cool wood floor. She pulled out an outfit and turned back to Harry who was trying, in vain, to force himself back into sleep. “You might as well get up Harry, if you fall asleep she’ll just wake you up again.” He groaned again and rolled over, falling off of the bed and onto the thick carpet under it.

“I love her to death but I miss when she used to sleep late.” He grumbled. She ignored him and stepped into the bathroom, a few seconds later he heard the water running.

Still grumbling about “hyperactive children” and “ungodly hours” he pulled a random pair of khaki cargo shorts and a button-up white shirt out of the wardrobe he tucked them under his arm and padded out of

the room and down the hallway to the nearest guestroom to take a shower in the large, though smaller than his own, bathroom.

The guest bathrooms were white and red with gold accents and gold threading through the bright white marble.

He took a quick shower, cold to wake himself up, and hurriedly pulled on his clothes. He could hear Hermione's and Catherine's voices speaking softly when he had made it down the stairs, the familiar sounds brought a smile to his face and a warm feeling into his chest. He pushed open the door and stepped into the room which was filled with a soft golden glow from the rising sun.

They were sitting in front of the glass wall watching the sunrise, Hermione holding the little girl on her lap and speaking softly to her. As he got closer he could hear what they were saying.

"My Mommy used to wake me up really early every Saturday and we'd go outside and sit on the porch and watch the sunrise. She'd hold me on her lap just like this and we'd sit for hours and hours." Hermione was saying the child on her lap.

"Really?" Catherine whispered. Hermione nodded and rested her chin on top of her head.

"Yes, it was always my *favorite* part of the weekend." There was a short comfortable silence then Catherine leaned back so her back was resting on Hermione's chest.

"I like it. Can we do it too?" Hermione wrapped her arms around her and smiled.

"Of course we can." They once again lapsed into silence and Harry walked closer to them, sliding down onto the floor behind Hermione. He wrapped his arms around the both of them and they all sat and watched the sun come up.

When light completely flooded the room in its bright glow they stood up and sat at the table. As soon as they were seated there was a pop and DeeDi appeared in front of the table.

“Good morning Master, Mistress, and Little Miss!” she said brightly.

“Morning DeeDi.” Harry said.

“Good morning DeeDi.” Hermione said, smiling at the elf.

“Good morning DeeDi!” Catherine responded, just as brightly as the elf had. DeeDi practically beamed as she walked over to the little girl.

“What would you like for your birthday breakfast Little Miss?” she asked kindly. Catherine’s eyes lit up.

“Chocolate-Chip pancakes?!” she asked excitedly. The elf smiled wider.

“Coming right up!” she popped out of the room. Two minutes later tall, steaming stacks of chocolate-chip pancakes, streaming with syrup were on their plates along with berries and tall glasses of orange juice and milk. Catherine squealed and dug into her pancakes with gusto.

“Don’t eat too fast or you’ll choke!” Hermione admonished though amusement was clearly in her voice. Harry eyed the pile of sweet, gooey cake with interest; he had never had chocolate-chip pancakes before. Cautiously he speared a small piece with his fork and popped it into his mouth.

At first the sheer amount of sugar nearly sent his body into twitches but then the warm chocolate melted on his tongue and the taste of the doughy cake filled his mouth and his eyes lit up. “*Now that is what I call breakfast!*” he dug into the rest of his food with the same enthusiasm as the little girl across from him, who already had syrup around her mouth and chocolate on her lips.

Breakfast passed in the way most of their meals did, in a relative comfortable silence. Well other than the outbursts of Catherine who would burst out into fast, one-sided commentary every once in a while then lapse back in silence. They all enjoyed the peace.

When they had all cleared their plates Catherine begged them to let her open her present.

"No, luv. You can open it later." Hermione told her, a grin tugging at her mouth. Cather frown, puzzled. She didn't see why she should have to wait for later, it was her birthday now. She turned to Harry, reading her puppy-dog look, the one thing that always got her Daddy to give in though it never worked on Mommy. Before she could fully turn on the charm he shook his head.

"Don't look at me like that. You can open it later." He grinned and ruffled her hair, making her curls look even wilder than usual. She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes, staring through slit lids at her smiling parents, they were up to something and she was going to figure it out.

She stood up out of her chair, brushing the crumbs from her yellow sundress, and put her little hands on her hips, trying to look indignant. The effect was ruined though as she kept trying to blow a stray curl out of her eyes. Trying not to giggle Hermione flicked her wand and the little girl's silky, and somewhat bushy, curls into two ponytails on either side of her head, tied with yellow ribbons.

Both Harry and Hermione burst into laughter as Catherine pouted at them. It was just so cute! The tiny girl trying to glare at them with self-righteous indignation but looking so sweet in her dress and curly pigtails. She stumped her white sandaled foot at their laughter which just sent them into more hysterics.

Trying desperately to hold in her giggles Hermione scooped up the still glaring little girl and kissed her forehead.

"Just be patient Cattie, you'll get your gift. I promise." She sighed dramatically but nodded and Hermione placed her back on the ground. Cattie pointed a stern finger at them.

"You better." She said, wagging her finger at them. With a sharp nodded she walked, or rather flounced, out of the room.

When she was out of sight they started laughing again.

"She has quite a bit of attitude doesn't she?" Hermione giggled. Harry snorted.

"Your daughter." She slapped his arm then wrapped her arms around his neck. She stood on her toes and kissed him.

"Good morning Harry." She whispered. "I didn't get to tell you that." He grinned down at her.

"Good morning 'Mi." he kissed her nose and she released him. For the first time that morning he took a good look at her. She was wearing a flowy long-sleeved white shirt with dark red flowers around the collar and a pair of khaki shorts that barely reached mid-thigh. He couldn't help but grin, he loved her legs.

"What are you staring at?" she asked, her head tilted to the side. With a crooked grin he stepped closer to her and ran his fingers lightly over the back of her legs, she shivered at his touch.

"You." He said simply. She blushed and brushed a strand of her curls, which she had left flowing down her back, out of her face. "Sometimes I forget how beautiful you are." He said softly as he ran his thumbs over her flushed cheeks. He leaned over to kiss her when he heard a small giggle from the doorway.

They quickly pulled away from one another and turned to the door. Catherine was standing in the doorway with Trouble sitting on her shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she giggled. He put his hands on his hips and mock glared at her.

"I was going to give your Mommy a kiss before you interrupted." She wrinkled her tiny nose.

"Ewww!" she squealed. "I came to tell you something." She said smugly. Hermione raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"I'll tell if you let me open my present." She was smirking now. Hermione's other eyebrow shot up.

"No." Catherine pouted and crossed her arms.

"But what I have to tell you is really important!"

"Then you should just be able to tell us."

"Fine." She grumbled. "Uncle Moony's head is floating in the fireplace." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the family room.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance then followed the little girl out of the room.

He'd never get used to seeing someone's disembodied head floating in the fire, Harry thought as they walked into the room and saw Remus's head grinning at them from the hearth.

"There you two are!" he exclaimed. "I have something to tell you about...later." he shot a pointed glance at Catherine who was watching curiously. Catching on to his look Hermione turned to Catherine.

"Why don't you go upstairs and play for a little while?" she pursed her lips but she didn't argue. Still shooting them suspicious looks she slowly left the room and headed up the stairs.

When she was gone they turned back to the man in the fireplace.

"So, what did you need to tell us?" Harry asked, kneeling down onto the carpet in front of the fireplace so he could look directly at the other man. Hermione sat down, resting on her knees and also turned her attention to the werewolf.

"It's about our...house guest." He began, wincing slightly. "Tonks and I were wondering if you minded if we bring him along? We can't exactly leave him alone, who knows what kind of trouble he'd get himself into!" Harry opened his mouth to say no, that it was absolutely out of the question, when Hermione elbowed him.

"Of course you can." His eyes widened at her words and his mouth dropped open.

"What?! You *can't* be seri-

“What time will you be coming over?” she interrupted. Remus grinned at the sputtering Harry.

“We’ll be there by 12 o’clock if that’s ok?” Hermione smiled warmly and nodded. The older man bid them farewell and his head disappeared from the flames.

“You invited *Malfoy* to our *house*?!” Harry exclaimed, incredulous. “That-that overbearing, prejudice, spoiled, arrogant, little prick?! Have you gone completely nutters?!” One of Hermione’s eyebrows rose.

“Are you done?” she asked with infuriating calm. He continued to stare at her in complete dismay. “Good.” Her expression suddenly softened. “I know you dislike Malfoy” she shot him a look at his snort. “And you don’t trust him but I don’t think he’s going to go off and tell anybody where we are. He couldn’t if he wanted to! Remus and Tonks have enough trust in him to even suggest bringing him along and I think we can trust their judgment.”

“It’s not just that Hermione, I don’t want him around Catherine.” He said, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Hermione nodded.

“I don’t really want him around her either, I’m not sure if she’s ready to be exposed to that kind of prejudice. I don’t doubt he’ll say something about her being a muggle-born.” She suddenly grinned. “Well if he tries something at least you’ll have an excuse to hurt him.” He grinned in return.

“I feel a bit better.” She laughed and stood up, pulling him up with her.

“We should talk to her about it.”

“Yeah, warn her a bit.” He said, sighing. They left the room and headed up the stairs and into Catherine’s brightly lit room.

She was sitting on one of the cushions on the fuzzy carpet in front of her fireplace with a large book on her lap. Trouble was sitting on top of her wardrobe and when he saw Hermione he launched from on top of it, aiming for her head. If she hadn’t ducked he probably would’ve met his target.

“Stupid animal!” she cursed as the kneazle landed on Catherine’s bed. He settled himself on the soft blue blanket and he watched Hermione with gleaming eyes.

“He just likes you Mommy.” Catherine said from her spot on the floor. Harry grinned and sat next to her.

“He likes her alright, likes the way she tastes.” He growled and bared his teeth sending the little girl into giggles. Hermione sat on a cushion next to them, still eyeing the kneazle on the bed warily.

“He better not try anything.” She grumbled. She tore her eyes away from the animal and looked at the child in front of her, her eyes instantly softening. “We need to talk to you about something Catherine.” Seeing the serious expressions on her parent’s faces Cattie marked the page of her book, **1001 Magical Creatures and Places**, placed it next to her and folded her hands in her lap, looking at them expectantly. Harry took a deep breath.

“You see Cattie...In the wizarding world there are some people-some people that have extreme prejudices. They believe that muggle-borns (people who were born in non-magical families) witches and wizards are inferior to “Pure-Blood” witches and wizards. Pure-Bloods are people whose entire family is made up of magical people.” Catherine nodded.

“I know all about that.” She gestured to a stack of books on one of her end tables. “I read about it in a book I got out of the library.” Hermione and Harry exchanged a surprised look.

“Oh...Well we just wanted to talk to you about it because later today we have a...friend.” She elbowed Harry hard in the side at him barely concealed laughter. “A friend coming over later today and he has the same views. We want you to understand that he might say some very mean things and we want you to know that none of it is true. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being a muggle-born and the belief is completely ignorant. Do you understand?” Catherine nodded again.

“Yes, I understand.” Harry reached out and tugged one of her pigtails.

“Good. But if he does say something to you just come and tell me and I’ll kick his a-” seeing the sharp glance Hermione sent his way he stopped himself. “I’ll beat him up for you.” He winked at the little girl and she giggled and winked back. They each gave her a kiss on the forehead and left her to her reading.

“Well that went better than I expected.” Harry said as they walked up the stairs, heading up to the third floor.

“Yes, but she’s a smart girl. I knew she’d understand.” Hermione grinned. They greeted Caterina and Bronson and continued down to the huge glass doors at the end of the hall.

They had decided to have Catherine’s birthday party in the conservatory as it was her favorite room in the house, well favorite next to the library and her own room.

The room was flooded with the bright light of the freshly risen sun and the view of the vast landscape that was their yard was breathtaking. The roses the climbed the walls were fully bloomed and the light on the water of the large pool sparkled like diamonds. There really wasn’t much decorating they could do to make it look any more beautiful.

“I love this house.” Hermione sighed. They descended the stairs and began decorating the room.

It only took them a couple of hours to decorate the room to their liking. A large white banner with “Happy Birthday Cattie!” spelled out in sparkling yellow and pink letters stretched across one glass wall, streamers hung from the ceiling and wrapped around pillars, Hermione had cleverly changed the color of the roses to pink and yellow and they had enlarged the table so it could easily fit ten and changed the cushions of the wicker chairs so that they were striped with pink and yellow.

“I think we did a pretty good job!” Harry said, slinging an arm around Hermione’s shoulder. She grinned up at him.

“We did. I hope she likes it.”

“She will, she’ll absolutely love it.” She smiled and it quickly disappeared when she caught sight of his watch.

“Remus and Tonks will be here in two minutes!” she grabbed his arm and dragged him up the stairs which was quite a feat considering he was at least three inches taller than her and fifteen pounds heavier. He pried her fingers from his arm.

“Calm down ‘Mi! There’s no need to rush.” He placed a placating hand on the small of her back.

“I know...Having Malfoy in my house kind of makes me nervous.”

“You invited him.” She opened her mouth to retort but he interrupted her. “I’m joking. It’ll be fine.” They continued their trek downstairs, pausing to check in on Catherine, who was still sitting on the floor with her book, before heading downstairs and into the family room.

The fire was just beginning to flare green when they stepped inside. The first to come out of the fireplace was Tonks. Surprisingly she look fairly normal, her hair loose and her bangs falling into her clear gray eyes, she was wearing a pair of light colored jeans and a button-up purple plaid shirt.

“Wotcher Harry, Hermione!” she greeted them.

“Hello Tonks.” Hermione said, giving the older woman a hug. Before Harry could greet her the fire flared green again and Malfoy stepped out, a sneer already on his face. Tonks and Remus must have forced him to wear muggle clothes as he was wearing black pants and a long sleeved blue shirt, they also must be lacking in whatever it was he used to slick back his hair because it was loose and hanging in his eyes. Standing next to Tonks the family resemblance was striking.

“Hello Potter,” his sneer grew wider as he looked at Hermione. “Granger.”

“Malfoy.” She acknowledged. Her voice was surprisingly polite and she smiled at him. His delicately arched eyebrows rose and he narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

The fire flared green again and Remus stepped out. He has also forgone his robes in favor of khaki pants and a brown shirt. He grinned at Harry and Hermione and pulled them each into a hug.

"Hey Cub, Hermione. Where's Catherine?" he asked, looking around the room.

"Hello Remus. She's upstairs in her room." Harry said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the hallway. Tonks peered around the comfortable room with interest.

"Nice place you've got here." She said.

"Thanks." Harry said. He and Hermione led them out of the family room and into the vast hallway.

"Wow, *really* nice place you have here." Harry grinned at her awed expression.

"How very...Gryffindor." Malfoy muttered. They ignored him and continued up the stairs. Just as they made it to the landing Catherine's door swung open and she walked out. She stopped short when she saw the people assembled in the hallway.

"Uncle Moony! Tonks!" she exclaimed. She dropped the book that was under her arm and ran down the hall and straight into her "Uncle Moony's" arms. He twirled her around causing her to shriek happily. "What are you guys doing here?" she asked when they had stopped.

"It's your birthday isn't it?" Tonks teased. The little girl nodded happily. Her large smile turned into a curious frown when she saw the fair haired boy leaning against the banister.

"Who are you?" she asked him, her head tilted. He looked down his nose at her, the perpetual Malfoy sneer playing on his lips.

"Draco Malfoy." He said, coldly. Undeterred by his tone she grinned at him.

"Hi Draco! I'm Catherine Elise Potter." She said, imitating his tone. He raised an eyebrow at her, intrigued by the child.

"We have a surprise for you Cattie." Harry said, taking her from Remus's arms. Her emerald green eyes lit up.

"A surprise?!"

"Yep! Come on." They ascended the stairs, up to the third floor, though Malfoy trailed behind.

Bronson and Caterina watched them curiously when they made it to the third floor.

"Look Caterina, guests! We haven't have had guests in *ages*!" the noble knight exclaimed. The beautiful woman in the portrait across from him shot him an irritated look.

"Your rudeness usually scares them away." She said dryly. Ignoring the man's pout she turned back to the group, offering them a warm smile.

"Welcome to the Potter family Cottage." She said in her soft musical voice.

"Thanks, glad to be here!" Tonks said enthusiastically. Remus reflected her sentiments while Malfoy kept his mouth shut and face blank.

They continued down the cool hallway and to the very end where light filtered in from the conservatory.

"Close your eyes Cattie." Harry whispered in the little girl's ear. Practically shaking with excitement she closed her eyes tightly and put her hands over them. Hermione reached out and turned the room, leading everyone inside. Both Remus and Tonks gasped at the sight of the glittering room and Harry could even hear Malfoy take a sharp intake of breath. Though Remus had been to the third floor many times he's never seen the conservatory up until now.

"Ok Cattie, open your eyes." The little girl moved her hands and opened her eyes which widened with surprise and delight.

“Oh!” she gasped. Harry placed her on the ground and she fairly ran down the stairs, the adults following more slowly. She looked around the room in wonder, eyes wide trying to take everything in. “It’s so...It’s so *pretty!*” she gushed, staring up at the banner. She turned back to Harry and Hermione and threw her arms around their legs. “Thank you so much!” Hermione reached down and picked her up, hugging her close.

“No need to thank us. We love you and we wanted your birthday to be extra special.” Harry nodded in agreement and kissed her forehead.

“Plus, we like to spoil you.” He winked. She giggled and winked back. Hermione placed her back on the floor and turned back to their guests, suddenly feeling shy. Seeing her slightly hesitant expression Tonks sidled over to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“So, have you and Harry *enjoyed* living together?” she asked, wagging her pale eyebrows suggestively. Hermione’s cheeks flushed bright red and her mouth dropped open.

“Tonks!” she exclaimed, horrified. She couldn’t believe the older woman had suggested *that* in front of Remus and *Malfoy* of all people! She could see the mortified expression on Harry’s face and the plain amusement on Remus’s. She didn’t even have to look at Malfoy to see the disgust twisting his features. Catherine just looked at them all in confusion.

The older woman burst into laughter and released Hermione, plopping down on the wicker couch. As soon as she sat Malfoy sat next to her, close enough to gain comfort but far enough away as to not seem like he actually liked her. From the stiff way he sat and the way he squared his jaw they could tell he was uncomfortable and wary, as if expecting an attack any second. Harry shot a curious glance at Remus who shook his head and sat next to the two blondes, clearly saying he’d tell him later. Pushing the information to the back of his mind Harry sat in one of the larger wicker chairs so Hermione could squeeze in next to him. Catherine sat in a chair at the head of the table that Harry had charmed so it resembled a throne and the pink and yellow roses would grow up the sides of it. The little girl

seemed delighted by her special seat. When she sat a crown made of rose appeared on her head, she clapped her hands happily, squealing. It was all a bit lavish but they really wanted this to be a birthday she'd remember forever.

When everyone was seated around the table there was a pop and DeeDi and Molby popped into existence at the head of the table, next to Catherine. Both bowed to the small group.

"I am DeeDi." The matronly elf said, she gestured to the younger and fidgeting elf next to her. "And this is my Molby." The smaller elf blushed brightly as she said his name and he bowed again, wringing the bottom of his tunic nervously.

"It's nice to meet the both of you. I'm Remus Lupin." Remus said, politely.

"Yes, very nice to meet you. I'm Tonks." Tonks said. Malfoy said nothing, he didn't even acknowledge the elves existence. Tonks elbowed him in the side, and he shot her a glare. She returned the glare with a raised eyebrow and a pointed look at the elves that still stood next to the table.

"Draco Malfoy." He reluctantly said. The elves nodded at each person and then turned back to the little girl sitting in her "Throne".

"We has something for Little Miss Cattie." DeeDi said. She and Molby snapped their thin fingers at the same time and there was a small flash of light at the center of the table. When the light faded they could see a birthday cake. It was three layers, like a small wedding cake, it was covered in thick yellow frosting with pink trim that looked like lace. Little pink, white, and yellow butterflies flew daintily around the confection and 'Happy Birthday Catherine!' was spelled out in pink frosting on the very top layer. Seven pink and yellow candles were also arranged on the top of the cake.

"Yous like it?" Molby asked hesitantly. Instead of answering Catherine jumped out of her chair and wrapped her arms around the elf who squeaked in surprise. It was a strange sight considering Cattie was taller than the elf.

"I love it. Thank you!" she released the still shocked elf and next hugged DeeDi who returned the embrace happily. She released the older elf and thanked them both again, DeeDi said it was their pleasure and Molby continued to blush. They popped out of the room and Catherine hopped back into her chair.

Hermione stood up and waved her wand over the cake and the candles were immediately lit. When the candles were lit they began to sing 'Happy Birthday'. They danced through the frosting thoroughly delighting Catherine, she began to sing with them and everyone else soon joined in. Well not Malfoy of course, it was completely undignified.

When they finished the song Cattie blew out the candles and they clapped for her. She beamed and Hermione pulled out her camera and took a picture.

The vanilla cake was cut into thick slices and placed onto pink and yellow china plates that had appeared when the candles were blown out. Everyone dug into the delicious cake with gusto, even Malfoy.

"So, you look rather normal today Tonks." Harry said, grinning at the woman across from him. Tonks put on a mock sad look.

"Aye, sad isn't it?" Her expression returned to normal. "Actually it's because of the pregnancy. Along with my hormones my magic is all wonky so if I say, tried to turn my hair purple I'd end up with a giant nose. And if I try to summon a book I'd end up summoning the entire bookshelf." She shrugged and took another bite of her cake. "So I've been living like a muggle." She suddenly grinned. "The upside is that now Remus and Draco here have to do my bidding, cater to my every whim!" Both Harry and Hermione's shot up at that, *Malfoy* had actually been helping out?

"Really?" Hermione asked, eyeing Draco dubiously. He sat up straighter and glared rather defiantly back at her.

"Yes, Draco has actually been a rather big help." Remus responded, smiling at the teen sitting between him and Tonks. Draco kept his features blank but inwardly he was pleased at the werewolf defending him, though he'd never admit it.

“So, is it time for presents?” Tonks said after a slightly awkward silence. Catherine’s head shot up and she looked up at Harry and Hermione hopefully. Harry shrugged.

“Sure, why not?” both Cattie and Tonks cheered drawing chuckles from Remus, Harry, and Hermione.

Tonks stood up and reached into her pocket, she pulled out a present about the size of a bottle cap. She placed it on the table and Remus tapped it with his wand. It tripled in size. It was wrapped in shiny silver paper with purple polka dots on it and a large purple ribbon was tied into a bow around it. She handed it to Catherine.

“It’s from Remus, Draco, and I.” she said, rather unnecessarily.

“Thank you.” Catherine said politely. Without much fanfare she pulled off the ribbon, setting it aside as she loved ribbons, and then tore off the paper.

Under the paper was a thick book bound in green leather. On the front, written in gold flowing script was the title **The Complete Book of the Magical Creatures**. With a stunned expression she picked up the tome, which was lighter than it looked, and opened it. She gasped. **This book belongs to: Catherine Elise Potter** was embossed on the inside of the book.

“Th-thank you so much!” she stammered her thanks at the grinning couple and the reserved teen.

“No problem kiddo.” Remus said as she hugged them both. She threw her arms around Draco’s neck, surprising everyone, especially him. He patted her nervously on the back a couple of times and she released him, grinning.

She sat back in her seat and looked at her parents expectantly. She had been waiting for *days* for her present.

Harry flicked his wrist and a medium sized brown box appeared in front of the little girl. She furrowed her brows in confusion but she reached out and opened the lid of the box and peered into it. Something was shining dully at the bottom of the box but she couldn’t

tell what it was. She reached down into the box and grasped whatever it was. The smooth coolness baffled her but she continued to pull it out of the box. She nearly dropped it when she had pulled it out.

The light had hit it just as she pulled it out, casting rainbow colored lights over their faces. She gently placed the crystal box in front of her and with hesitation lifted the top, still not sure if it was really meant for her. The breath rushed from her lungs when she saw the necklace nestled on a velvet pillow in the middle of the jewelry box.

Instead of just giving her the necklace in the box they has transfigured it into a jewelry box. A little crystal angel was perched just under the lid, when you touched her she would spring to life, dancing and singing. Catherine's name had been etched onto the lid of the box and they had added little compartments under the necklace but it was the centerpiece of the box.

"Is this...is this for *me*?" Catherine asked in amazement. Harry got out of his seat and kneeled in front of her, carefully taking the necklace out of the box and unclasping it.

"Yes, it's for you." He said, speaking softly. The others could barely hear what he was saying. "You see Cattie this necklace has been in our family for many, many years. Every Potter woman since my great, great, great, *great* grandmother has worn it and now it is your turn." He gently clasped the necklace around her neck. It was long on her, nearly reaching her stomach but when it touched her skin it flashed white and it changed. It had shortened so that it now rested on her breastbone, next to the crystal dragon.

The thin braided chain of the necklace was now bright gold and the heart pendant was made of peridot. The green of the stone nearly matched her eyes though it was a paler green.

"Thank you Daddy." She said, just as softly. Harry pulled her into his arms and kissed her forehead. Hermione kneeled down next to them and Catherine went from his arms to hers. "Thank you Mommy." Hermione kissed her hair.

"You're welcome, luv." Still fingering the necklace Catherine sat back in her throne and they continued the party.

The celebration lasted until the sun began to set. They had given their guests a tour of the vast cottage, sans the panic room, Harry and Hermione's bedroom, and the dueling room. They had even stayed for dinner. Before they had left Remus had handed Harry a small square of white parchment.

"What's this?" he asked the older man. Remus grinned.

"Open it." He responded. Harry did as he was told and his eye nearly bugged out of their sockets. Hermione gasped happily from his shoulder.

Mr. and Mrs. Potter,

You are cordially invited the wedding of Remus John Lupin and Nymphadora Julianne Tonks...

He stopped reading and looked at the older couple in shock.

"You're getting *married?!'*" he exclaimed. Hermione clapped her hands and threw her arms around both of them.

"Oh! I'm so happy for you!" she released then and snatched the invitation from Harry's limp fingers. Harry shook himself out of his shocked state and grinned at her.

"This is great! When's the wedding?" Remus beamed at him.

"Saturday." Harry blinked at him in confusion.

"*This* Saturday?" he asked incredulously. "That's like three days from now!" the werewolf nodded.

"Yes, we wanted to get married as soon as possible." He said, grinning. Harry shrugged and pulled the man into a hug.

"I'm really happy for you two, Moony." He whispered. Remus returned the embrace.

"Thank you Cub." He released him and clapped him on the back. Harry quickly hugged Tonks also.

"So Mr. and Mrs. Potter, you're coming?" she asked when he released her.

"Of course! We wouldn't miss-" he stopped suddenly. "Mr. and Mrs. Potter?" Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Well you are engaged right?" Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"Err...How'd you know that?" they hadn't gotten around to telling anyone yet, it never seemed like the right time. Tonks rolled her eyes again.

"Honestly Harry! You don't think we wouldn't have noticed that huge ring on Hermione's finger? I mean *really!*" she smacked him none-too-softly on the arm. Malfoy snorted from his seat on the couch and Harry shot him a glare.

The couple and the teen bid them farewell and disappeared through the flames one by one, Remus going last.

"God I'm bushed!" Hermione said, leaning against Harry. He nodded.

"Me too. Let's go get Cattie to bed and we can get some sleep." He took her hand and they headed back up the stairs and into Cattie's room. They had sent her to take a bath while they said goodbye to everyone. She was already dressed in her pajamas and in bed when they stepped into the room. She was curled up on top of her covers with her new book and the rose crown still perched on top of her head.

"Time to put the book down Kitty-Cat." She looked up as Harry spoke, pouting.

"I'm not sleepy!" she whined. She reluctantly closed the book and placed it on her bedside table next to the jewelry box. She was still wearing the necklace.

"You only think you're not sleepy." Hermione told her. She turned down the covers and Cattie climbed in. Harry sat on one side of the

bed and Hermione on the other; he tucked the covers snugly around her and took the crown off of her head, placing it on the table on top of her book.

"Nighty night, luv." He said dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Nox." The lights were instantly extinguished; they could see each other only by the light of the moon shining through her window.

"Sweet dreams, sweetheart." Hermione also kissed her forehead. She was right, the little girl was sleepy, her eyelids were already drooping.

"Night Mommy, Daddy." She murmured. They stood up to leave when her sleepy voice interrupted them. "Draco's not as mean as you think he is. He's just scared." Before they could answer she was asleep.

"Well, I didn't expect that." Hermione whispered to Harry as they left their room. "He was actually nicer than I thought he would be." Harry nodded, he had been thinking the same thing.

"Maybe there's more to Malfoy than we think." He said. They stepped into their room, ready to rest their minds and bodies. They were content in their happiness. They had nearly forgotten what lurked in the outside world, waiting.

They didn't see the darkness, the turmoil, and the struggles that lay ahead.

A/N: I know what you're thinking "Finally! An update!" no worries! Next chapter won't be as long of a wait.

I needed to write a bit of fluff before the action ahead, hint, hint. I hope you liked it! Thank you everyone for your reviews! And thank you for reading this chapter.

Chapter 21

"I can't do it, Daddy!" Catherine sighed, dropping the shimmering shield in front of her.

"Yes you can. Just concentrate." Harry said soothingly. They were standing in the dueling room; Catherine had begged him to teach her some magic as he had promised. Instead of teaching her summoning spells, which she already knew, he had begun to teach her shielding spells.

He knew he and Hermione wouldn't always be around to protect her and he wanted her to be able to protect herself if anything happened.

"I am concentrating!" she ran a frustrated hand through her wayward curls, a habit she had picked up from Harry.

Harry smiled knelt in front of her, placing his hands on her green t-shirt clad shoulders.

"I know, luv. Take a deep breath, calm down." She nodded and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Better?" he asked when she opened her eyes. She nodded again and her eyes narrowed in determination.

He squeezed her shoulders and released them; he stepped back and once again raised his hand. He flicked his wrist, shooting out a spell with as little power in it as possible.

"***Rictosempra.***" The spell shot out of his hand and headed for the little girl. She raised her hand and a shimmering white shield appeared in front of her. The spell bounced harmlessly off of the shield.

"I did it!" she squealed happily, dropping her shield. He grinned and stepped closer to give her a hug.

"Yes you did! I'm proud of you." He released her and she beamed up at him.

“Can I try it again?”

“Of course! This time let’s try to keep it up a *bit* longer.” She nodded and he stepped back. He lifted his hand and once again flicked his wrist, putting a bit more power into it than the last one. The spell flew towards the child who immediately raised her hand and the bright shield appeared in front of her.

The green of her eyes seemed more intense than usual, glinting with some unseen light. The shield grew brighter and seemed to warp, changing from a flat disk of white in front of her and slowly wrapping around her until it completely surrounded her in a giant globe of magic. The spell once again bounced off of her shield and it held.

She continued to hold up the shield for a few more minutes, Harry could barely see her through the globe but he could see her outline and he could tell she was sagging slightly.

“Ok Cattie! Lower the shield!” he shouted. At first he thought she hadn’t heard him because there was no change in the shield but slowly it began to shrink, seemingly being absorbed into her body. In less than a minute it was completely gone.

The child dropped to her hands and knees, sweat pouring from her face. Harry flew towards her, dropping to his own knees in front of the now slightly shaking child.

“Cattie! Cattie, luv, are you alright?” he asked frantically, his hands cupping her face and lifting it so he could look into her eyes. Her face was flushed and clammy but her eyes were still bright and alert. Her breath was coming in pants. Maybe he was pushing her too hard.

“I’m-I’m ok, Daddy.” She managed to say through her gasps, trying to smile. He shook his head and scooped her into his arms.

“Maybe we should take a break.” She opened her mouth to protest but he cut her off. “Don’t argue.” His voice softened. “Magic is hard and sometimes tiring. That was a very powerful spell you just did and I’m so proud of you! You did a great job.” She grinned tiredly and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Daddy.” She yawned. “I am a bit tired, can I go lay down for a little while?” he nodded and shifted her to his hip.

He carried her out of the room and down the stairs; he padded down the hallway and into her room. He placed her on the bed and she promptly leaned against her pillows.

“Stop worrying Daddy. I’m just tired.” She yawned; hugging her pink stuffed monkey she named ‘Rosie’.

“I’m not worried.” he lied.

“Yes you are.” She said, rolling her eyes. She snuggled deeper into her large pillows, her eyes closing briefly. He shook his head, smiling slightly, and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll be back to get you for dinner, ok?” she nodded, her eyes closing again. He left her room, closing the door behind him, and headed down the hallway and to the library.

Hermione had planned on spending the day trying to find out more information on Ravenclaw’s chess piece. He had offered to help but she insisted that he go ahead and start teaching Cattie instead. Truthfully he hadn’t really thought about the horcruxes in a while.

He found Hermione at one of the huge wooden tables surrounded by books about ancient artifacts and the founders. He could only see her head from above the stacks of books; she didn’t turn around when he stepped behind her.

“How’s it going?” he asked, peering over her shoulder. She jumped, obviously not noticing that he had even walked into the room.

“Harry! *Don’t* sneak up on me!” she had her hand over her heart and she mock glared at him. He grinned and slid into a seat next to her.

“I didn’t, *you* were just being unobservant. Anyway, have you found anything new?” she sighed and shook her head, tucking a curl that had escaped from the messy bun on top of her head behind her ear.

“Nothing. There’s surprisingly very little information on Rowena Ravenclaw and after that mention of it in Hogwarts: A History there is nothing on the chess piece. It’s like after her death it just dropped off of the face of the earth.” She closed the thick tome in front of her. “So, how’d it go with Cattie?”

“It was amazing ‘Mi!” he grinned. “She conjured a perfect shield, a perfect one. “She has more power than I expected from someone so young. At first I thought it was because of the adoption but when I thought back on the attack she was able to produce just as powerful of a shield then.”

“She really did well?” she asked, excitedly.

“Extremely well. It tired her out quite a bit though, she’s taking a bit of a rest in her room right now.” Her eyebrows creased with concern.

“Maybe I should go check on her...” she swung her legs over the side of the chair and made to get up but Harry grabbed her arm and pulled her into his lap.

“She’s fine ‘Mi, just tired.” He placed a swift kiss on the back of her neck. She tilted her head and he kissed her cheek.

“You know Remus and Tonks’s wedding is tomorrow.” She said, resting her head on his shoulder.

“What time?”

“Well the invitation said to be there at 11am.”

“Where?” she turned her head and shot him an exasperated look.

“Honestly! Didn’t you read the invitation?” he grinned crookedly.

“I read the beginning.” She sighed and laid her head back in his shoulder.

“Anyway, it’s at Grimmauld Place.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his chin on top of her head.

“Good.”

10:30am and the Potter home was in chaos.

“Catherine! I said no!” Hermione snapped at her daughter. She had been trying for the past half an hour to get the little girl dressed for the wedding. She had woken her up an hour earlier to *avoid* the rushing and confusion, unfortunately Cattie seemed to have other ideas.

It had started when she woke her up, the child moaned and whined because she said she was “still tired” though doing the week she never had any problem with waking them up before they had even decided to rise. She had dragged her feet in the shower and now after Hermione had dressed her into a pair of white silky dress robes with small roses around the hem and sleeves and a red ribbon tied around the waist she was whining because she wanted to wear her favorite pair of yellow rubber boots! And they hadn’t even gotten started on her hair yet!

“But Mommy-” she stopped abruptly when her mother shot her a sharp look. She quieted down and put on the white dress shoes she was given. While she tied the straps Hermione started on her hair. She flicked her wand over the wild curls and they were instantly tamed, falling in smooth tumbles down her back. She separated the top and pulled it into a ponytail with a bright red ribbon. She took a step back and surveyed her work, satisfied that the little girl was ready she kissed her cheek and headed back to her and Harry’s room. She was ready to start panicking when she didn’t see Harry in the room, she relaxed when she saw the bathroom door open.

He was standing in front of the mirror, a look of intense irritation on his face as he wrestled with his tie. Just as she stepped in he ripped it off angrily and glared down at the silky black fabric.

“Need any help?” he whirled around at the sound of her voice, the tie dangling from his fingers. He grinned sheepishly.

“That’d be nice.” She smiled and stepped closer, taking the tie from his hand. She wound it back around his neck and began tying it.

“Why didn’t you tell me you looked so good in a suit?” she asked him, smirking. A blush flared across his cheeks but he returned her smirk.

“It’d be impossible to describe.” He winked.

“Think a lot of yourself don’t you Potter?” she said with a firm tug on his tie. She released it and stepped back.

“Perfect.” the dark suit fit him perfectly as Yves had intended. Black dress robes were pulled over the suit. He looked very dapper, the eyebrow stud and messy hair somehow didn’t ruin the affect at all. He grinned and did a little twirl.

“Thanks, luv.” He frowned down at her.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” he asked, incredulous. She frowned slightly, offended by his tone then she remembered what she was wearing and groaned.

With waking and dressing Catherine she had forgotten to get dressed herself. She had just jumped out of the shower that morning and pulled on a bathrobe, her hair was a right bushy mess and they needed to be leaving in the next fifteen minutes.

“Go make sure Catherine still has her shoes on and go downstairs while I get ready.” She told Harry, pushing him out of the bathroom. Before he could answer the door was closed in his face. Shrugging he left the room.

Catherine was still wearing her dress shoes when he walked into the room but she was still eyeing her boots longingly.

“Come on Kitty-Cat, let’s go downstairs.” She hopped off her bed and he picked her up.

“Where’s mommy?” she asked as they walked down the staircase.

“She’s still upstairs, getting dressed.”

“Oh.” The walked down the hallway and into the family room, plopping down on the cushy couch.

He and the little girl played 'Eye-Spy' while they waited for Hermione to descend the stairs. After spying the silver picture frame for the fifth time he was about ready to go up the stairs and go and get her when he heard the bedroom door close.

"Ready to go..." his voice trailed off, mouth dropping open. He had always thought Hermione was beautiful but...but *this* was amazing.

She was wearing off-the-shoulder dark red dress robes trimmed in gold and her dark hair was loose, curling down her back, and a gold headband was pushing the hair away from her face. She wore very little makeup, just a bit of pink lipgloss and shimmering gold eyeshadow and she was wearing a pair of gold kitten heels.

"How do I look?" she asked, doing a little twirl. He continued to stare, completely speechless.

"Absolutely gorgeous." He said softly. The gentle blush he loved so much flared across her cheeks and she smiled, obviously pleased.

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek, thanks to her shoes not having to stand on her toes as usual. Catherine hopped off of the couch and wrapped her arms around Hermione's waist.

"You look so pretty Mommy!" she gushed. Hermione bent down and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"Thank you Cattie! You look beautiful." The little girl blushed and released her.

"Thank you." Harry grinned at the both of them and gestured towards the fireplace.

"Shall we go?" he asked.

"We shall." Hermione walked up to the mantle and grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar and threw it into the ever burning fire. The flames flared green and she stepped inside.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" she disappeared and as soon as she was gone Harry looked down at the child standing next to him.

“Ready?” she nodded firmly and he picked her up. He grabbed and handful of the glittery green powder and threw it into the flames, before he stepped into the fireplace he turned and looked down at the little girl in his arms. “Do you remember what to do when we floo?” she sighed heavily.

“Yes Daddy. Keep my eyes and mouth closed and don’t let go of you or Mommy.”

“Good. Let’s go!” he stepped into the fireplace and Catherine locked her arms around his neck, burying her face in his neck.

“12 Grimmauld Place!” he squeezed his eyes shut and tried not to think about the insane spinning and the sudden nausea he was feeling.

He made sure to land on his back so Catherine wasn’t crushed when they tumbled out of the fireplace at Grimmauld.

“Harry!” someone shouted. He felt hands reach out and haul him to his feet, Cattie still in his arms. “Good to see you mate!” at first he thought he had spun a little too much and he was seeing doubles when he realized who he was seeing.

“Fred! George!” he exclaimed, grinning. “How’ve you guys been?” one of the twins, he wasn’t sure which one, grinned at him.

“We’ve been grand our esteemed investor!” the other twin also grinned.

“As you can tell.” He said, gesturing to their outfits. Harry’s eyebrows shot up at the rather...flamboyant suits they were wearing. They were wearing black dragonhide suits, one with a nearly fluorescent orange button up shirt and an orange and white striped tie, the other a purple shirt and white and purple striped tie. Both had grown their hair long, which Mrs. Weasley couldn’t be happy about, and had it tied back in ponytails with red ribbons.

One of the twins, in the purple, looked at Cattie curiously.

“Well, so it is true! There’s a little Miss Potter.” He took a dramatic bow, tipping an imaginary hat. “I am George Weasley dear lady.” He took her hand and kissed it sending her into giggles. Fred stepped forward and bowed also.

“Fred Weasley at your service.” She stuck out her hand and he promptly kissed it. She raised her chin and peered down at them.

“Catherine Elise Potter. I’m charmed to meet you.” She said haughtily then broke back into giggles.

“I like her.” George said. Harry placed the little girl on the floor and took her hand. He was a little thrown when he realized that they weren’t the only ones in the room.

Across the room; leaning against the wall with a cup of pumpkin juice was Hestia Jones. Her black hair was pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck and she was wearing soft purple dress robes and she was watching them hesitantly.

Harry could feel Catherine grabbed hold of his leg. She remembered that woman; she had been with the man who had tried to take her away from her Mommy and Daddy!

The woman stepped away from the wall, placing the cup on a coffee table, and walked hesitantly towards them.

“Hello Mr. Potter.” She looked down at the wary child. “Catherine.” Harry kept his face blank but afforded her a short nod. She looked down, wringing her hands then took a deep breath and looked up, directly into Harry’s eyes.

“I just wanted to apologize to you and your family. I had no idea the Dumbledores were going to do that! He had only told us that he had found you and that he needed to speak with you, that he just wanted us to guard you! If I had known...If I had known what he had planned I wouldn’t have gone.” Her voice rang with sincerity and her eyes never strayed from his. He stared into her eyes, searching for any sign of insincerity.

“Apology accepted.” She let out a small breath and smiled at them.

“Thanks Mr. Potter.” He returned her smile.

“It’s Harry.”

“Ok, Harry.” She looked away from him and stooped down, eye-level with Cattie. “Do you forgive me also?” the little girl stared at her thoughtfully then nodded, a shy smile playing on her lips. They lapsed into a short awkward silence then the woman smiled again.

“Well I ought to be getting upstairs, see how Tonks is doing.” She nodded again and left the room, heading up the stairs.

“What was that about?” George asked, once she was gone.

“She was just apologizing for Dumbledore’s little...ambush.” Fred nodded in understanding.

“Ah, we heard about that.” He winced “Not something you’d expect old Dumbles to do.”

George shook his head. “Oh how the mighty have fallen.” He suddenly grinned. “Now is not the time for such grim talk!” he slung an arm across Harry’s shoulder. “Not when the great Harry Potter has returned!” Fred also swung a long arm across his other shoulder.

“We’ve missed you mate! We haven’t had a near-death experience in about...” he made a great show of checking his watch. “Two months and twenty days!” he exclaimed, a look of shock on his face.

George wagged a finger at Harry. “You must be slipping mate.” He opened his mouth to retort when Catherine tugged on his pants leg.

“What’s the matter, luv?” he asked her.

“Where’s Mommy?” he looked around the room, where was Hermione?

“Your Mommy is in the kitchen.” George said, gesturing to the door on the far side of the room. They followed the twins to the kitchen. They didn’t hear any voices when they came to the door but when Fred opened it they understood why.

Hermione was standing on one side of the kitchen island, her hands resting on top of it and an almost anguished look on her face. Across from her, standing in the doorway of the other kitchen door was Ron.

One of his hands were gripping the doorframe so hard his knuckles had turned white and he was glaring angrily at the girl across from him, or at the ring on her finger. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill and Fleur Delacour were also in the room, watching the two teens. The room was thick with tension.

Ron's eyes moved to them, Harry watching them cautiously with a little girl clutching his hand. He stared at the child, the bright green of her eyes, the gentle slope of her nose, the dark curls that tumbled down her back, the shape of her cheekbones, the aristocratic arch of her eyebrows, and the delicate pout of her lips. She was the perfect mixture of Harry and Hermione and it sickened him.

There was a flash of hurt in his eyes then his face dissolved into anger and he stormed out of the room. Both Harry and Hermione flinched when the door slammed. Her eyes began to fill with tears and Harry promptly stepped away from the door and to her side, sliding an arm around her waist.

"It's ok luv, he'll come around." she let out a noise, something between a snort and a sob, but nodded. Harry released her waist.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath, pulling herself together, and forced a shaky smile onto her face. Mrs. Weasley stepped forward and pulled Harry into a hug.

"Good to see you again, dear." She said softly into his ear.

"It's good to see you too Mrs. Weasley." He said as she released him. She smiled and squeezed his shoulders.

"I guess congratulation are in order?" she gestured to the ring on Hermione's hand. Harry nodded and she smiled brightly though there was a trace of sadness in the expression. "Congratulations dears." She gave them each a hug and a kiss on the cheek then pulled back.

The smile faltered. "I should go and check on Ron." After another small smile she left the room. When the door closed behind her Harry was suddenly engulfed in a heady scent of flowers and something akin to honey. Slim arms had encircled his neck and a distinctly feminine body was pressed against his.

"Arry!" Fleur exclaimed, kissing both his cheeks. "It's so good to see you!" He was staggered for a second, suddenly hyper aware of how stunningly beautiful she was but he quickly shook it off and grinned at her.

"Hello Fleur! It's good to see you too. How've you been?" the beautiful veela woman stepped back and he took a good look at her, slightly surprised at how he barely felt a twinge at her beauty.

She was wearing silk purple dress robes much like the ones he saw Hestia wearing. They were low-cut, showing off her slender neck, her silky blonde hair was pulled into a French braid that fell down to her slim waist and a simple gold necklace with a diamond was her only adornment. She was stunning but to him she didn't hold a candle to Hermione.

"I have been very well." she said happily.

"I see that your English is a lot better." She beamed and glanced over her shoulder at Bill, a small smile playing on her lips.

"Bill 'az been helping me." Harry smirked at the obvious looks of adoration on both their faces.

"She's a very good student." Said Bill, grinning.

"I bet she is." One of the twins snickered. Mr. Weasley shot them both looks and then moved from where he was standing, by the pantry, and walked over to Harry and Hermione, laying a hand on both of their shoulders.

"How are you two, really? We've all been so worried about you." Both his tone and his expression was serious, and lines had appeared on his face that hadn't been there before.

Hermione smiled softly at the man and placed a hand over the one on her shoulder.

"We're good, really good. There is no need for any of you to worry about us. Or Catherine." Her hand dropped from the older man's and she ran a hand through Cattie's curls. The child had sidled up next to them as Harry had been talking to Fleur.

Mr. Weasley blinked and looked down in bemusement at the little girl, he had truly forgotten all about her.

"Oh, yes. Catherine." He knelt down and smiled at the child. "Hello Catherine, my name is Arthur."

"Hi." She said, smiling shyly. He smiled at her again and stood back up, turning his attention back to the two teens.

"Does Remus and Tonks know that you're here?" he asked them.

Harry shook his head. "I don't think so." The elder Weasley man rubbed his hands together then gestured to the second door.

"Well then let's go up and tell them!" He led them out of the sunny kitchen and up the staircase. Their feet sunk into the plush carpet of the hallway, their steps completely muted by the flooring. He led the farther down the hallway and stopped.

"This is where Tonks and the other women are." He said, pointing at a large door which was probably Remus and Tonks's bedroom. "And this is where Remus and the men are hiding." He gestured to a smaller door, a guestroom more than likely, the same room he and Ron had slept in. He reached over and knocked on the larger door. There was a nothing for a second but then a feminine voice shouting for them to come in.

Mr. Weasley turned the handle and pushed the door open.

Girlish giggles and feminine voices flooded the hall as soon as the door was opened. Mr. Weasley seemed to pale slightly and he looked like he wanted nothing more than to turn around and escape back to the safety of the kitchen.

Remus and Tonk's bedroom was painted a soft tan, the carpet a plush white. There was a large sleigh bed next to two large windows made of light wood, the blanket was a deep red with gold threading and dark red curtains covered the windows.

There weren't many people inside; Malfoy was lounging on the bed, his arms folded behind his head, wearing a dark suit the dress robes lying next to him. He was staring up at the ceiling with rapt attention though every once in a while his eyes would flick to a woman sitting at the foot of the bed. Hestia Jones was sitting on a bench at the foot of the bed next to a woman that held a striking resemblance to Narcissa Malfoy. She had white blonde hair pulled into a low bun and bright gray eyes but unlike Narcissa her face was rounder and kind, the eyes warm and soothing and the mouth slightly upturned as if there was always a smile waiting to come forth. She was wearing long pale gold dress robes and gold diamond earrings hung from her ears.

Standing next to the two women, looking bored out of his mind in a dark suit, was a man with close cut graying brown hair and a heart shaped face. His eyes were laughing and the color of a midnight sky. These people were obviously Tonks's parents. Also in the room was Ginny Weasley. She was wearing seemingly new purple dress robes and her fiery red hair was pulled into a high bun with two curls framing her face. A girl, about a year older than Catherine was also in the room. She with flowing golden blonde hair in ringlets and pale blue silk dress robes. Even though he hadn't seen her in two years he instantly recognized her. Gabrielle Delacour. There was another woman in the room dressed in formal black dress robes, closely cropped silver hair and a monocle. Another face he recognized, Amelia Bones.

And in the middle of it all was Tonks.

She was standing in front of a large picture window. She had forgone dress robes in favor of a muggle wedding gown. Her dress was rather simple, a floor-length white gown with thin straps that crossed in the back. Her pale hair was pulled into a bun and fastened with a single silver clip and a thin silver circlet was placed on top of her head, studded with tiny diamonds. It held a sheer veil that flowed down her

back. Her lips were painted with red lipstick. Her cheeks were flushed and her clear eyes sparkled with a happiness he had never seen before. Right then and there she was more beautiful than any veela.

Harry was pulled out of his musings by a squeal and a shout of his name. Before he could register who had spoken he was nearly knocked off of his feet by a weight hitting his legs and someone wrapping their arms around them.

He looked down into the bright blue eyes of Gabrielle Delacour. She said something to him but it was in French and all he caught was his name.

“Err...Hello?” he said hesitantly. The little French girl released her hold on him, still beaming, and Catherine promptly stepped forward and wrapped one of her arms around his leg. Who was this girl and why was she hugging *her* Daddy? Still clutching his leg she watched the blonde girl through narrowed eyes.

Said girl opened her mouth to let out another stream of French when Tonks stepped away from the window and crossed the plush white carpet to where they stood, still in the doorway. She immediately pulled them both into hugs.

“Hermione! Harry! It’s about time you two got here! We were about to start without you.” She released them, grinning.

“Tonks you look gorgeous!” Hermione exclaimed, a tinge of awe in her voice. Tonks flushed a bit.

“Thanks.” She said and ran a hand over the silky fabric of the gown. She seemed a bit in awe herself. Her eyes suddenly began to fill with tears.

“I’m getting married.” She whispered brokenly. The woman, Andromeda Tonks, stood from the stool and quickly crossed the room to pull her daughter into a hug.

“It’s alright, Dorrie.” She murmured into the younger woman’s ear, rubbing her back. Tonks sniffled and pulled her head from her mother’s shoulder, wiping the traces of tears angrily from her face.

"Why do I keep doing that!" she exclaimed, obviously frustrated, and still wiping her eyes. Mrs. Tonks smiled amusedly at her.

"Because you're pre-" Tonks shot her a look and she quickly rectified what she was saying. "preparing to get married!" Harry's eyebrow shot up, so they were keeping the pregnancy a secret?

Tonks rolled her eyes but hugged her Mother again. He saw her whisper something in the older woman's ear but he couldn't hear what was being said. When she released her from the embrace she turned back to the young couple, noticing that Mr. Weasley had slipped out during her little 'episode'.

"Sorry 'bout that you two, I'm a bit overemotional today." She said, smiling apologetically.

Harry waved a hand dismissively. "It's alright, we understand."

"Have either of you spoken to Remus yet?" she asked glancing towards the door, her eyes brightening slightly as she said his name.

"No, we've only just got here actually." Hermione answered her. The woman nodded and gestured towards a cream colored couch, indicating that they could sit over there. Harry took one look at the assembled women and the weary man and took a step back towards the door.

"I'm just going to go speak to Remus." He said hastily. He detangled Cattie's arm from his leg and made towards the door.

"I'll come along." A smooth voice said from behind him. He turned, keeping the surprise out of his face and shrugged as Malfoy slid off of the bed, throwing his robes over his shoulder, and followed Harry out.

He sighed in relief when the door closed behind him. He crossed the hallway and to the smaller door, Malfoy silently following behind. He knocked on the door and was a bit of shuffling then the door opened. Remus instantly pulled him into a hug.

"There you are Cub." He said once he released him.

“Hey Remus.” A smile tugged at his lips as he took in the older man’s extremely nervous expression and the near panic on his face. “How are you?”

“Me? I’m great.” His voice cracked on the last word and Harry raised an eyebrow. Malfoy rolled his eyes and pushed past them and into the room, sliding onto a couch.

Remus ushered the other teen inside before he could ask anymore questions and possibly freak him out any further.

They had painted the room a soft green. The floor was a light wood with a large green floor rug in the middle and a window took up half of the far wall.

There were only three other people in the room. Mr. Weasley was sitting in a tan arm chair in front of the window, Charlie Weasley was sprawled across a green and tan bed in the corner and Kingsley Shacklebolt was leaning against the wall next to him. They were all wearing black dress robes with suits underneath though Mr. Weasley’s looked a bit more worn than everyone else’s.

“Well if it isn’t the Boy-Who-Disappeared!” Charlie teased. He got up from the bed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. His ponytail was longer, flopping over his shoulder, and he still had his earring. “How’s life been treating you?”

“Pretty good.” Harry said, grinning. Kingsley pushed himself away from the wall and walked over to them, clasping Harry’s hand in his in a firm handshake.

“Hello Potter. Have you been taking care of the girl?” he asked. The warm brogue of his voice brought a smile to Harry’s face. Everything about the big man was calming and comforting but there was no doubt that if he needed to he could be quite dangerous.

“Yes, we’ve taken very good care of her.” He answered. He plopped down in a chair next to Mr. Weasley.

“So, what time does the wedding start?” he asked. Remus checked his watch and paled dramatically.

“Five minutes.” He choked. Just as the words left his mouth there was a knock on the door and without waiting for an answer the door opened and Amelia Bones.

“We’re ready.” She stated, a small smile tugging at her thin lips. What very little blood that was left in Remus’s face drained away and he slumped into another armchair next to Harry’s.

“You know your Father was a right mess the day he and Lily got married. He was as pale as snow and sweating buckets. Sirius and I even had to stop him from escaping out of a window.” He chuckled slightly. “We teased the life out of him. But now, now I understand what he was feeling.” He took a deep breath and stood up.

“Let’s go.”

The backyard of Number 12 Grimmauld Place had been completely transformed.

The entire area was shaded by a canopy of white roses that let sunlight filter through, casting soft light of the guests below. The few guests sat on cushioned wooden benches below the canopy facing an alter. The alter was made up of a white rose covered arch where Amelia Bones stood, Remus nervously standing next her and surprisingly Draco standing next to him. A large circle was made with rose petals in front of the alter and a white silk carpet extended from the backdoor all the way to the arch and rose petals were scattered over the grass and carpet.

Sitting right up front, next to Andromeda Tonks, was the Potter family. Catherine was sitting between Harry and Hermione, her feet swinging and looking around for Tonks. Directly behind them were the Weasley’s. Including Ron but sans Ginny. Gabrielle was also sitting with them, her head on Bill’s shoulder.

Suddenly soft music began and the backdoor opened. The first to step out was Hestia, a banquet of violets in her hands. She advanced slowly down the aisle, after her came Ginny, and then Fleur. They walked down the aisle and stopped by the arch, just outside of the circle.

The music changed, becoming the classic wedding march and everyone stood. Tonks appeared in the doorway, her arm threaded through her father's. Even through her veil Harry could see the beaming smile on her face and the tears shining in her eyes.

As she walked down the aisle Remus's hand flew to his chest and his mouth dropped open, from his seat Harry could see his eyes moisten.

When they made it to the alter Mr. Tonks turned to his daughter, lifted her hands and kissed them then pulled her into a hug. He held her for a long time, seemingly reluctant to let her go. Once she finally released her he gently grasped her hand and placed it in Remus's. Mrs. Tonks let out a small sob. Ted Tonks stepped away from his daughter and her soon-to-be husband and headed to a spot next to his wife, who immediately took his hand.

"Ladies and Gentlemen." Amelia Bones began. "You all know why we are here today, to join these two people in a tradition held most sacred in our world-marriage. Now if the bride and groom would please step into the circle and take hands we will begin."

At those words, Remus and Tonks stepped into the flower circle. He reached up and lifted the veil away from her face, he took both of Tonks's hands in his own and smiled at her.

"Both of you have stepped into this circle as two separate people on two paths that will combine here. And when you step out, your paths will combine together and take down a most wonderful road that is paved with both your loves for one another," Ms. Bones said "Now, if we could have the rings."

Malfoy reached into the pocket of his robes pulled out a tiny platinum ring with an engraving of leaves making a circle all the way around the bands with a diamond cut emerald and handed it to Remus. He reached into another pocket and pulled a near identical ring though it was larger and there was no emerald.

"Now, if you two would please place the ring on each other's fingers we can continue," Amelia announced.

Remus reached across, taking Tonks's left hand with his right as she did the same. At the same time they both slid the platinum bands onto each other's fingers before looking to the older woman in front of them. "Now, if the groom would please repeat after me. I, Remus John Lupin, take you, Nymphadora Joanne Tonks,"

"I, Remus Lupin, take you, Nymphadora Joanne Tonks," Remus repeated. Everyone chuckled at the look of distaste on Tonks's face at her name.

"Into my heart forevermore," Amelia Bones continued once everyone had calmed down.

"Into my heart forevermore."

"My love as ongoing as this circle."

"My love as ongoing as this circle."

"Until death do us part."

"Until death do us part."

Amelia smiled warmly at Remus before turning to Tonks, "And now if the bride would please repeat after me. I, Nymphadora Joanne Tonks, take you, Remus John Lupin."

"I, Nymphadora Joanne Tonks, take you, Remus John Lupin."

"Into my heart forevermore."

"Into my heart forevermore."

"My love as ongoing as this circle."

"My love as ongoing as this circle," her voice cracked slightly and she began blinking rapidly.

"Until death do us part."

"Until death do us part."

“By the Power granted by me through the Ministry of Magic, I now pronounce you husband and wife,” She declared, placing her hands over both Remus’s and Tonk’s hands. She turned to smile at Remus before announcing loudly, “You may now kiss the bride.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He pulled her close to him and pressed his lips against hers. Cheers rose from the guest and everyone rose to their feet.

“My I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Remus Lupin!” Ms. Bones managed to shout over the cheering. Hermione leaned over and shouted in his ear.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen either one of them so happy!” Harry grinned in return.

It took less than five seconds to vanish the benches and the arch. The canopy of flowers was transformed into a canopy made of a gauzy gold material and a shiny wood dance floor seemed to grow out of the ground. Tiny lights floated around the ceiling of the canopy and small tables covered with purple tablecloths and purple cushioned chairs. As soon as everything was transfigured music began to play.

Remus extended a hand to his new wife, bowing slightly. She smiled and curtsied in return, taking his hand. They stepped onto the impromptu dance floor, their arms instantly wrapping around one another as they swayed to the slow notes of the song.

Soon Mr. and Mrs. Tonks made it onto the floor and following them was Bill and Fleur and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see Hermione swaying slightly to the music and he said something he’d never though he ever would.

“Care for a dance?” he asked her. Her eyes lit up and she nodded, extending her hand for him to take. Before they walked onto the floor Hermione turned to tell Cattie where they were going but she had already sidled onto the dance floor with Gabrielle, seemingly having forgotten her earlier anger at the other girl, and they were dancing around, neither one actually on time with the music. They shrugged

and stepped onto the floor, Harry's arms encircling Hermione's waist and Hermione wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Sorry if I step on your toes." He murmured. She chuckled.

"It's ok, love hurts." suddenly her eyes widened. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" she whispered hastily.

"What?" he looked around, confused.

"Turn around." He spun, so that he was able to see what she had been looking at. His eyes widened. A few feet away from them, dancing rather close together was Draco Malfoy and Ginny Weasley.

"Tell me Hermione, is fire raining from the sky?" she snorted.

"Not yet." The unlikely pair twirled towards them and stopped right next to them.

"Harry." Ginny said, smiling brightly at him. "Can I speak to you for a second?" she glanced at Hermione, who was watching them with raised eyebrow. "Alone?"

"Err..." he looked to Hermione who pressed her lips together but shrugged. "Sure." He answered hesitantly.

"Great!" she placed a hand on his arm and began to lead him towards the back door. When he looked over his shoulder he saw Draco offer his hand to Hermione as an invitation to dance which she accepted. Harry looked up at the sky waiting for the fire to come.

Ginny led him back into the house and up the stairs. They walked in silence to the guestroom that he and the other men had been sitting in earlier.

"It's been a while, Harry." The red haired girl said, closing the door behind them. He smiled politely.

"Yeah. How have you been?" his voice was casual and relaxed but inwardly he was deeply uncomfortable, the way she was looking at him made him squirm in discomfort.

"I've been good." She sat in one of the armchairs and gestured towards another across from her. He sat in the chair, sitting stiffly. She took a deep breath and folded her hands in her lap, her eyes filled with determination. "Ok Harry, I asked you up here for a reason."

He had a bad feeling about this. "Go ahead."

"You see...ever since I first saw you in your first year, before I came to Hogwarts, I had...feelings for you." He worked hard to keep the look of mortification off of his face. Turns out his feelings were spot on. "At first it was just that you were the Boy-Who-Lived and then...then you saved me. You were, are, my hero." She leaned forward and he inched back.

"Ginny..." he said, at a loss for words.

"I know it's sudden but I really think we'd be great together." She placed a hand on his knee. He shifted his leg so her hand slid off.

"Look Ginny, you're a nice girl and I like you." Her eyes lit up and she made as if she was going to throw her arms around him but he held up a hand. "*But* I don't like you that way." She blinked, seemingly shocked by his words.

"But...but I always thought...I always thought that you liked me. We have so much in common!" he could tell she was beginning to get upset. "We both love quidditch, we're both seekers..." he shook his head.

"What about Hermione, Ginny? Catherine?" unusually she seemed to calm and she even smiled a bit.

"Oh, I understand about them Harry. You and Hermione adopted her to protect her. The same reason Hermione is living with you." She placed her hand back onto his knee. "That's why I like you so much, you'd pretend to love them just to keep them safe." This time he didn't bother to subtly move her hand he just grabbed it and threw it off of him. He shot out of his chair, glaring down at the stunned girl.

“Catherine is my daughter. I love her more than you will ever know.” He stepped closer and she shrunk into her chair. “Hermione is my fiancé. We are getting *married*.”

“B-but Harry...” she still wasn’t getting it. He was going to have to hurt her.

“No Ginny. What kind of relationship would we have? We barely know each other! We’ve never even had a real conversation and you expect us to all of a sudden be in love! Love doesn’t work like that. You cannot have a relationship based on hero-worship and jealousy!” her eyes were filling with tears, pity and guilt shook his resolve but he plowed on. “Get this through your head. I will *never* love you a *tenth* of the way that I love Hermione. That I love Catherine.” The tears spilled from her eyes and flowed down her face. She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before she jumped out of her chair and raced out of the room, her hands over her mouth to keep the sobs in and tears streaming down her face.

When she slammed the door behind her he collapsed back into his chair, burying his face in his hands with a groan.

“I’m a horrible person.” He mumbled into his hands. He sat in the silent room for a few more minutes, trying to calm his frazzled nerves. He was just standing up to head back downstairs when the door to the guestroom flew open.

“Who the hell do you think you are!” Ron shouted. His face was red and he was glaring at Harry with fury burning in his eyes. He slammed the door shut and the wall shook with the force of it. “How could you say that to Ginny!”

“Look Ron-” the redhead immediately cut him off.

“Don’t you dare! You disappear for a couple months then come back thinking that you’re better than us!” anger rose in his chest and he stood from his chair.

“I have never *once* said I was better than you and I sure as hell don’t believe it! We’ve been friends for way too long for you to even think I

feel that way.” If anything Ron’s face became redder and he stared at Harry incredulously.

“Friends! A friend would send someone an owl when they dropped off of the face of the earth! A friend wouldn’t treat his friend like dirt!”

“You have no right to talk! I sat in the Dursley’s house, miserable, trying to figure out why my so called best friend didn’t even bother to owl me!” Harry shouted in return. By now they were standing directly in front of one another.

“I told you already! Dumbledore forbade us to send you any message! He said it was the only way to keep you safe!” Harry snorted.

“And you believed that!”

“Why the hell would I think any different! Dumbledore always has his reasons!”

“That doesn’t mean he’s always right! Do you know how I felt? I felt like you had left me, abandoned me when I needed you most!” he could not keep the hurt and sadness out of his voice.

“Yes I know how you felt! How I *feel*. How do you think I felt when you disappeared? When everyone seemed to believe you were...that you weren’t coming back! Then Hermione’s family is attacked and then *she*’s gone too! I had no idea where you were or if you were even alive...I thought you both were dead.” His voice cracked on the last word and he was struggling with his emotions, blinking his eyes rapidly. The back of Harry’s own eyes began to burn and he clenched his fists, hoping to stave off the tears that threatened to fill his eyes.

“And then...” Ron croaked. “And then you come back and you were so *cold*! It was as if I didn’t matter anymore. You and Hermione had went and started a *family*. You had a whole new life and I wasn’t apart of it.” He ran a hand over his face, angry at himself for the emotion in his voice and the welling in his eyes. “I always thought of you as my family...my brother.” He flushed, obviously embarrassed to admit how much he actually cared. The wetness in Harry’s eyes spilled over onto his cheeks.

"You are my brother Ron." He said, his voice rough. Ron bit his shaking lip and quickly looked down to the floor so Harry couldn't see that he too had succumb to the burning of his eyes. "I'm sorry I was so cold to you, I just...I was so *hurt* Ron! Not only had Dumbledore betrayed me it seemed like my best friend, the closest thing to family I had, had also hung me out to dry. After seeing how alone and scared Hermione was, how *no one* had come for her I was even angrier." Ron looked back up and shook his head.

"We didn't know until it was too late-"

"I know. Your Mum told me that." They stared at one another for a second then Ron spoke.

"I just want us to be friends again." He whispered brokenly. Harry took a shuddering breath and offered his hand to Ron to shake. The other teen clasped his hand and pulled him into a hug.

"We are." Harry said softly. Ron released him, wiping his cheeks, a smile on his face. Harry smiled in return.

"I just hope Hermione will forgive me." The redhead said, his smile faltering.

"She already has." Both boys turned quickly to the doorway where Hermione stood. Her cheeks were wet but she was smiling through her tears. She stepped closer to them, closing the door behind her. "Did you really mean it?" she directed her question to Ron.

"Of course." As soon as the words left his mouth she threw her arms around his neck.

"We missed you so much Ron." She said, her tears coming full force. She reached over and grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him into the hug.

"I missed you guys too."

So just like that the Golden Trio was back together. There were a few scratches and scrapes that would take a while to heal but for now things were ok, they had been brought back together.

The days following the wedding were quiet. Remus was on his "Honeymoon" which meant he wasn't able to come over and teach Harry dueling so he spent much of his time practicing new spells, trying to commit as many as possible to his memory. When he wasn't doing this he was helping Hermione research various items used by the founders trying to find more clues to the horcruxes or he was teaching Cattie spells. He had even taken to teaching her how to play his guitar though it was a little large for her, she was doing remarkably well.

It was after one of these such lessons that Hermione stepped into the conservatory, where he and the little girl were, and walked over to the wicker couch that they were sitting on.

"I did really well today!" Catherine exclaimed to her mother.

"Really?" Hermione responded, pulling the child onto her lap and trying, in vain, to smooth down an errant curl.

"Yep! Daddy said I'm a natural. Right Daddy?" Harry nodded in agreement as he placed the guitar back into its case. After running a loving hand over the dark wood he closed the case and flicked his wand, sending it back to their room.

"So, any luck?" he asked the woman across from him.

"No, didn't find a thing." She sighed and pulled her ponytail tighter. "I was thinking we need a bit of a break, we need to get out of the house for a little while." Harry's eyebrows shot up.

"Out where?" he asked her. She grinned and sat up straighter.

"I was thinking we could go into town." Harry looked at her dubiously for a moment then shrugged.

"Alright, I don't see why not." Hermione grinned happily.

"Great!" she placed Catherine on the ground. "Go put your shoes on, luv." The little girl nodded and skipped happily up the stairs and out of the room.

“Is there any particular reason you want to go into town?” Harry asked.

“No, I just need to get out of the house.” She stood up and held a hand out to him, he allowed her to pull him out of his seat and up the stairs.

They headed into their bedroom, Harry released Hermione’s hand and walked over to the wardrobe. He pulled a simple black jumper out of it and his bag the he pulled it over his white t-shirt and jeans, he grabbed his shoes from next to the bed and slipped into them. Hermione had pulled a pale blue sweater over her head and changed out of her sweatpants and into a pair of dark jeans.

When they left the room Cattie was already out of her room and heading for theirs. She was wearing jeans and a purple and white striped hooded jacket over a black shirt and her favorite red sneakers.

“Where are we going again?” she asked them as they walked down the stairs. “Because I’m getting kind of hungry.”

“We’re going into town, a few miles away from here. We’ll stop for some lunch.” Harry answered her.

They continued down the stairs and into the entrance hall. Hermione opened the door and they were nearly blinded by the bright sunlight.

“Nice day for a trip.” Hermione observed, her hand shielding her eyes and a large smile on her face. It was a beautiful day, one of the last few days of summer.

Harry reached into his bag and pulled out the shrunken motorbike. He placed it on the walkway in front of them and tapped it with his wand. The bike sprang back into it’s original state. He didn’t hesitate to pull the helmets out of the compartment and hand them to his two girls, Hermione once again reminding him to get a third helmet.

Soon they were all on the bike and zooming down the tree lined road. Getting to town only took a few minutes and they were soon pulling up in front of the tiny café he and Hermione had visited all that time ago. It seemed like it had been years since then.

The café was as warm and cozy as it had been the first time. Instead of sitting by the window they slid into a booth nestled into a corner of the shop.

A familiar woman with light brown hair walked over to their table, a notepad in her hand. She nearly dropped the notebook when she saw the new edition to the party.

“Um, Hello, I’m Elizabeth and I’ll be your waitress today. Again.” She placed three menus onto the tabletop. Her eyes flickered restlessly from Harry’s face to the little girl who was reading her menu, ignoring her.

“Nice to see you again Elizabeth.” Harry said, smiling at her. A flush made it’s way to her face and she stopped looking at Cattie. “Could I have a glass of orange juice, please?” she nodded and quickly jotted it down in her book. She turned to Catherine, skipping over Hermione.

“What kind of drink would you like sweetie?” she asked her, as if speaking to a much younger child. Cattie gave her a cold look, she was small yes but that didn’t mean she like being talked to like she was a baby.

“Chocolate milk, please.” The woman blinked at the cold tone coming from the child and Hermione was suddenly very proud of her daughter.

“Err, ok.” She wrote that down to and rather reluctantly turned to Hermione. “Drink?”

“Earl Grey, please.” Her tone was only slightly nicer than Cattie’s.

“Alright, I’ll be right back with your drinks. Just tell me when you’re ready to order.”

“I’m ready!” Catherine said happily, her former coldness gone for now. “I’d like a Cinnamon Roll.” She handed her menu to the woman.

“I’d like that also.” Hermione said, also handing the waitress her menu.

"Blueberry Muffin for me." Harry spoke, handing her his menu. She wrote it all down and left the table. "So what do you want to do?" he asked Hermione, once she was gone.

"I'd like to go to that bookstore." She said, pointing through the window to a bookstore across the street next to an antique store, ignoring the roll of Harry's eyes. Catherine's head shot up from where she was spinning a saltshaker.

"Bookstore!" she asked excitedly. Harry winced, he was going to be stuck in bookstores for the rest of his life.

Elizabeth returned quickly with their orders balanced on trays in her hands. She set a muffin about the size of a large man's fist in front of Harry and his glass of juice then the icing smothered cinnamon rolls in front of Cattie and Hermione, along with their drinks.

"Thank you." Catherine said politely. The woman nodded and left the table.

Catherine entertained them through their meal by telling them all about the books she was going to get and how yummy her roll was. When they finished their food Harry paid, leaving a tip for Elizabeth, and they left the warm confines of the café.

It was a very short distance from the sidewalk in front of the café to the bookstore so Harry left his bike parked where it was and they jogged across the narrow street.

They had to walk a bit to get to the bookstore and the crosswalk was a little ways down from it. They walked slowly down the sidewalk peering into shop windows. As they were passing the antique store, **Cullen's Antiques**, Hermione suddenly stopped.

"Harry!" she gasped, pointing at something in the window. He looked to where she was pointing and his mouth fell open. *"It can't be! It couldn't have been right under their noses!"*

Sitting on a shelf in the window was a snow white chess piece. Tiny gold jewelry was embedded in it, a necklace around it's neck, rings on it's fingers, it's robes trimmed in gold, and a gold crown on it's

head. It's features were carved in amazing detail, it had the face of a beautiful woman. It was the Queen.

"It's impossible." Hermione murmured from next to him. "It can't be right there." Harry tore his gaze from the beautiful piece and turned to Hermione.

"We have to check anyway." She nodded and together they headed for the door.

"But what about the books!" Catherine exclaimed from behind them. When they continued to the door she sighed heavily and followed them inside.

Soft classical music was playing when they stepped inside and a tiny bell rung when the door was opened. They turned a corner, fully intending on checking the chess piece for the ornate S that Slytherin had taken to have stamped or engraved on anything he touched but as the walked to the shelf they were horrified to see a pudgy man taking the piece from the shelf and handing it to a woman in a black suit and horn-rimmed glasses.

"It's an amazing piece of craftsmanship." The man was saying. "Quite expensive. I'm surprised you bought it." The woman waved a tanned hand dismissively.

"Money is no object. My employer needed a gift for his young son you see, he's a chess champion." She spoke with a thick Italian accent. Panic began to rise in Harry's chest as the man began to wrap with piece in paper.

"Wait!" he said hastily, walking quickly towards them. The man turned to him with a questioning but kind look and the woman with a single raised eyebrow.

"What can I do for you young man?" the man asked him. Harry turned to the woman who had bought would could easily be a piece of Voldemort's soul.

"I will pay you double whatever you paid for that chess piece." Her other eyebrow shout up, disappearing under her thick black bangs.

"I'm sorry young man but it is not my decision. My employer might be willing to sell it to you though." She reached into the small purse on her shoulder and pulled out a business card which she handed to him.

Emilio Armand

Was printed neatly on the front with a crest under it. He looked up from the card to see the woman had already walked out of the door. Before he had a chance to decide to chase her down, stun her, then take it she was already in a red Porsche and zipping down the road.

"What are we going to do?" Hermione asked, stepping closer to him and speaking low so that the shop owner was unable to overhear them. Harry flipped the card over.

Rome, Italy

"We're going to Italy."

A/N: Ok, I'm just going to say it now. There will be NO Ginny/Draco romance. Sorry to all you D/G shippers but it's not happening in this fic.

I know you all expected action in this chapter but unfortunately you were wrong! I'm pretty sure y'all have been getting tired of the constant emotion in the past few chapters but fences needed to be mended and lines drawn before things could really get going. I had to cut the wedding a bit short because this chapter was waaaay to long so sorry about that. Also the vows from the wedding were adapted from a fic called "Beautiful" by Ella Cieux.

Anywho thank you for reading and reviewing! It always makes my day to see a new review in my e-mail .

Chapter 22

"But we don't even know if it's actually the horcrux! We can't just go gallivanting out of the country after some chance meeting in an antique store!" Hermione said, exasperated as she watched Harry throw clothing into a suitcase.

After they had left the antique store they had headed straight home, Harry pushing the bike it's the limit. He knew there was a slim chance that it was actually Ravenclaw's chess piece but he sure as hell wasn't going to take the chance of losing it.

"Hermione we can't just let it go." He responded firmly, trying to wrestle the suitcase closed. Hermione absentmindedly flicked her wand and the clothing refolded itself and settled neatly in the leather suitcase. She sighed and sat on the bed.

"Well let's at least sit down and think this through first. Come up with some sort of plan." Harry looked at the shirt in his hand then the case on the bed; he sighed and threw the shirt down, plopping down onto the bed, next to Hermione.

"Alright, I guess I wasn't thinking. So, you have any ideas on how to approach this?"

"Slightly." She reached into her pocket and withdrew the business card. "I don't think we'll be able to just ring him up and ask to buy it from him. This is *Emilio Armand!*" she put emphasis on the name, sounding almost awed. She looked at him like he should know who this man was but he just looked back at her blankly.

"Honestly Harry! Don't you watch television?" she shook her head as soon as the words left her mouth. "Never mind. Emilio Armand is a famous plastic surgeon. He does all the work for the big celebrities. They say that he's the best in the world. He even has his own television show."

"But what does that have to do with him selling us the chess piece?"

“Well from what’s been said about him in magazines and on the telly he isn’t exactly sane. Well not quite insane, more like extremely paranoid. He trusts no one except for his wife and children, and a select few close friends. He won’t sell it to us because we’re strangers. He believes that everyone is out to get him, to steal his fortune and ruin his success, he’ll think that we’re some kind of spies or something.”

“That’s crazy.” Harry said, snorting.

“Paranoid delusions rarely make sense.” Hermione rolled her eyes and continued. “Anyway, he will only sell it to someone he trusts. The only way we’re getting near it is if we get near Dr. Armand.”

“So you’re saying we’ll have to be his friends?” Harry clarified, sounding more than a little dubious. Hermione nodded.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” He stared at her in disbelief, there was no way that plan was going to work.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just steal it from him or something? I mean it’ll take a lot of time to gain his trust, time I’m not sure we have.” He ran a hand through his hair. “One, If he is as paranoid as you say he is he won’t just trust us after only knowing us for a few days and Two, I doubt he’ll go out of his way to befriend a couple of teenagers.”

“Maybe so, but we still have to somehow get into the house. As for the time it’ll take I guess we’ll have to invest a little time into it.” she replied firmly. “And the teenager thing is easily fixed. All we need is a simple aging potion. If we take it in small doses it should only age us a few years, though we’ll probably have to take more every couple of days. Almost like the Polyjuice potion.” Harry pursed his lips, as insane as it sounded it was a rather good idea. Though he still thought it would be easier to just take it from them.

“Alright. How are we supposed to meet him?” he relented. She leaned forward, her eyes suddenly excited.

“I actually have an idea about that. Dr. Armand and his wife have two children, a son about twelve and a daughter that is Catherine’s age. If

we become friendly with his family I'm sure we'd have a better chance of gaining his trust."

"Sounds good, if not a little devious." He said, grinning. "As soon as we get the chance, we'll have to steal it." the woman next to him sighed heavily.

"I know but for now we still have to concentrate on getting into the house. Or finding out wherever it is that they keep it." She said, already sounding weary. "I don't like the idea of having to steal it from them. I much rather just buy it."

"Hermione. We can't be worrying about the morals of it now, there is just too much at stake."

"I *know* it just...it just doesn't feel right." She shook her head. "Let's just burn that bridge when we get to it. Right now we need to get back to planning."

"Alright. I know you already have a plan." He grinned, trying to lighten the mood. She smiled brightly in return.

"You know me too well." She leaned forward, looking excited. "We'll have to act the part. We'll have to be your classic ridiculously rich, arrogant, spoiled family."

"So basically we'll have to be the Malfoy's?" She let out a rather unladylike snort of laughter.

"Not exactly, a bit nicer. We'll also need to find out more information on the Armand's. Their hobbies, extracurricular activities, likes and dislikes..."

"We'll have to stalk them." Harry deadpanned.

"Not stalking, more like...research." He rolled his eyes and took the business card from her hand, turning it around in his own.

"When do you think the aging potion will be finished?" he asked her, assuming she intended on preparing one.

"We already have a shelf stacked with them in the potions cupboard!" she exclaimed, looking at him incredulously. He shrugged.

"Good. One less thing to worry about. Now we just need to get packed and we can get going." He was anxious to hurry and leave, just sitting around was making him feel like they were wasting valuable time.

"We can't leave just yet Harry. We still have to tell Remus and Tonks that we're leaving, come up with a plausible story, fake a bit of background information, and most importantly we have to explain to Cattie, to some extent, what we're doing and why it's so important." He knew she was right but that didn't calm the restlessness he was feeling.

"Alright 'Mi. How about you finish packing while I go and tell Remus and Tonks about our little holiday. Then we'll both go and talk to Cattie, ok?" Hermione pursed her lips but she agreed.

He jogged down the stairs and into the family room. He grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar over the mantel and threw it into the flames.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" he shouted after stepping into the hearth. He was pleasantly surprised to notice that his stomach was faring a lot better than usual. Finally he was a bit more used to flooing. When the world abruptly stopped spinning he tumbled out of the fireplace. *"Well,"* he thought wryly. *"My landing isn't getting any better."*

The teen pushed himself to his feet, brushing soot from his jeans and looked around the room wondering where the older couple was.

"Tonks? Remus?" he called.

"Harry?" he heard Remus answer, sounding confused. The kitchen door opened and said man stepped out. He was wearing loose fitting khakis and a red t-shirt, a large bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans was clutched in one of his hands. "What are you doing here?"

"I have something to talk to you and Tonks about." Harry replied.

“Alright, we’re all ears.” He said offering him a warm smile. He gestured to the door behind him, indicating for Harry to follow him back into the kitchen. He followed the older man into the brightly lit room where Tonks and Malfoy were sitting at the kitchen island.

Two more bags of Every Flavor Beans were on the table, their contents spilled into a bowl in front of Malfoy who was separating brown, blue, and green beans from the rest of them and transferring them from his bowl to another large bowl that was in front of the woman across from him. Both pairs of gray eyes shot to them when they stepped inside.

“Wotcher Harry!” Tonks exclaimed, smiling happily. “Would you like some caramel, blueberry, and grass Every Flavor Beans?” she popped a handful of the candy into her mouth.

“Err...No thanks Tonks.”

“Are you sure?” she asked after she swallowed. “The grass isn’t as disgusting as you’d think. It tastes kind of...fresh.”

“I’m sure it does but I think I’ll pass.” She shrugged.

“So what brings you by?” she asked him. Malfoy, contrary to his enthusiastic cousin, just went back to the bowl of candy, ignoring the other teen. He had been living with Remus and Tonks for nearly three weeks already and though he had gotten closer to the two adults, Tonks especially, he still treated Harry and Hermione like scum. That was another reason why Harry had been so shocked to see him dancing with both Ginny *and* Hermione at the wedding; Tonks had informed him later on that she had threatened to hex him once again if he wasn’t polite and gentlemanly to everyone. So in other words act nothing like himself.

“I just wanted to let you know that Hermione, Catherine, and I will be going on a bit of a...trip for a while.”

“Really? Where are you going?” Remus asked, sliding onto a stool next to Malfoy.

“Well...” Harry shot a glance at the blonde boy, not wanting to say where they were going in front of him. He severely doubted that he was going to go tell someone about it, it wasn't like he could leave the house, but he still didn't completely trust him.

Seeing the suspicious look the other boy was giving him Malfoy sneered and folded his arms across his chest.

“Please Potter, like I care where you and your little mudblood family are going.” He was lucky Remus's condition gave him such quick reflexes and he was able to pull him out of the way or Harry's fist would've left a pretty large dent in his face.

“Harry!” Remus shouted, placing a hand on the boy's chest before he could try to launch himself at Draco again.

“Don't you *ever* speak of my family like that again or I swear I'll make sure you never speak again.” Harry hissed at the smirking teen. Remus pushed him onto a stool then turned to Malfoy. The smirk slid off of his face at the glint in the werewolf's eyes.

“You *will not* use those kinds of slurs in this house.” He said firmly. “We've had this discussion before and we *will* make good on our promise if you break that rule again.” Malfoy seemed to understand what he meant because he paled slightly, something that was quite surprising considering how pale he already was, though he still looked angry. Harry forced himself to breathe, taking slow deep breaths until he was calm, or at least calmer than he was before.

“You act like you don't think the same thing.” The blonde boy scoffed at the older man. “Like you don't know that muggles are beneath us.”

“They are not *beneath* us.” Harry snarled. Malfoy turned to him and sneered.

“Drop the ‘Holier than thou’ attitude Potter. You know they're weak. Useless. Powerless.” He leaned forward so that he was only a foot away from Harry's face. “They have no defense against us, against our power. If you didn't believe it you wouldn't try so hard to protect them. If we were all equal you and Dumbledore's little underlings wouldn't try to protect them from Death Eaters and ‘dark wizards’

because they'd be able to defend themselves against us. But they can't. Because they are nothing compared to witches and wizards. Because they are weak and below us." He straightened and shook himself out of Remus's grasp. "You can keep trying to fool yourself into believing that you treat everyone equal, that you have no prejudice but you and I both know that that's a lie. You think just like everyone else." Without a backwards glance at the silent people around the table he swept out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind him.

"Well," Tonks sighed, breaking the silence. "I don't completely agree but a lot of what he said is true." She held up a hand to forestall the outraged response from Harry. "I think it's ridiculous to say that they are useless or weak, my father in neither of those, but there aren't many ways they can protect themselves against magic. We are more powerful than them in that regard." Remus sighed and sat back onto his stool.

"I'd have to agree and if you think about it Harry you'd see that some of what he said is true." Harry just pressed his lips together, disbelief coloring his features. "Just think about it. Anyway, where is it that you're going?" he said, changing the subject.

"Venice, Italy." Tonks let out a low whistle.

"Why are you going to Italy?" Before answering Harry turned to the kitchen door and flicked his wrist, casting a privacy charm. When the faint light faded from the doorframe he leaned forward, clasping his long fingers in front of him on the table.

"While Hermione, Cattie, and I were in town we found an item we think might be one of Voldermort's horcruxes in a muggle shop." Remus's eyebrows shot to his hairline and Tonks's eyes widened. Remus had told her, with Harry's permission, of the horcruxes only a few weeks ago. "A woman was buying it as we walked in and before we thought to stun her and take it from her she was gone. Though just before she left she gave us a business card with the name of her "employer". The man who had her buy it for him lives in Italy. We're going to get it from him."

"How long will you be gone?" Tonks asked, popping another bean into her mouth. Harry shrugged.

"A few days. Weeks. We don't really know for sure." Remus nodded.

"Are you taking Cattie along?"

"Yeah, we'll be taking her." Both the adults looked at him with shock.

"You're *taking her*?" Tonks exclaimed.

"Um, of course. Why would we leave her behind?" the older couple exchanged an incredulous look.

"Harry...you don't know what could be waiting for you!" Remus said, shaking his head. "For all you know this could be one of Voldermort's tricks. There could be Death Eaters waiting for you, hell there could be Voldermort himself there. You shouldn't take the risk."

"Look, I really don't believe that this is some plan orchestrated by Voldermort. Do you really think that Hermione and I would even think of bringing her along if we thought there was some possibility of her being in danger? We can protect her." He told them, completely confident. He didn't think there was any chance of this actually having anything to do with Voldermort, the last thing he would ever do was put his daughter in danger.

"Harry-" Tonks began.

"We know what we're doing." Harry interrupted his tone final. He stood up to leave, knowing that they were just going to continue trying to convince him to leave Cattie behind. "I have to get back home. I'll owl you guys later." Remus sighed and stood up with him.

"Just be careful, ok Cub?" he pulled the teen into a strong hug then released him.

"I will." Harry assured him. Tonks stood also and wrapped her arms around him. He returned the petite woman's hug.

“Keep that little girl safe, alright?” she said firmly, poking him in the side. He grinned and released her.

“With my life.” He gave them a small smile then left the kitchen, heading to the large fireplace in the living room. He took a handful of the sparkling green powder in the jar on the mantle and threw it into the flames, instantly turning them green.

“Potter Family Cottage!” he stumbled out of the fireplace and into an end table, knocking an oil lamp onto the floor.

“Harry? Is that you!” Hermione shouted from the top of the stairs, hearing the crash of the lamp.

“Yeah, it’s me!” he responded as he repaired the lamp. He was placing it back on the table when she stepped inside of the room.

“What happened?” she asked him, eyeing the lamp still in his hand. He smiled sheepishly.

“Just a little accident.” He let go of the lamp and turned to the woman across from him, taking note of her nervous expression.

“I guess it’s time to talk to Cattie?” he asked, sighing. She nodded then bit her lip.

“I don’t think we should tell her.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and threw himself onto the couch. It was only 12 o’clock in the afternoon and he was already feeling tired, he really didn’t feel like dealing with all this right now.

“Why not?” she pursed her lips at the slight irritation in his voice but sat on the seat next to him.

“All it will do is worry her, scare her unnecessarily. We should just tell her we’re going on a trip.”

“I thought you said we would have to look different. How will we explain that to her?”

“I haven’t really...thought of that.” She blushed.

"We could just tell her it's a game." He suggested, shrugging. Hermione shook her head.

"That won't work; she's too smart for that."

"Then we just tell her the truth. There is something important that we're doing and we'll have to act different. We'll look different. That she just needs to trust us."

"You know she won't just take that as an answer, she's even more curious than you are."

"Don't I know it." he muttered, smiling. If Catherine found anything she found interesting she would stop at nothing to find out every bit of information she could. Rather this meant going through nearly every book in the library or pestering he and Hermione with seemingly endless questions.

"She might not go for it but I guess it's the best we can do for now." Hermione said, standing. "Let's go." Suppressing another sigh he pushed himself off of the couch and followed her out of the room. They walked up the stairs in silence, each caught up in their thoughts.

Harry kept thinking about Malfoy and his little "speech". He knew that on some level he was right but his mind rebelled against the notion. He just couldn't make himself agree. Maybe it was just because Malfoy said it.

He was jarred out of his thoughts when Hermione opened the door to Cattie's room. The little girl was lying on her stomach on her bed playing with Trouble. She looked up from her game and sat up with a slight frown, she was still a little angry at them for not taking her to the bookstore like they had planned.

"We have something to talk to you about, Kitty-Cat." Harry said, sitting next to her. The petulance disappeared from her face, replaced by curiosity, as Hermione sat to them.

"Do you remember what happened in the antique shop earlier today?" the older witch asked. Catherine nodded.

"Well you see, the thing she bought...it was very important and we have to get it back." Harry said. "We have to go to Italy to get it." the child's eyes lit up with excitement.

"Italy? Really!" she gushed. She squealed happily when Hermione nodded, an amused smile on her face.

"Yes! But there are some things we'll have to do why we're there." Hermione said. "There are some people we have to meet but to meet them we'll have to look different. Your father and I will have to take a potion that'll make us look older,"

"An aging potion." The child interjected knowledgably. Hermione nodded again.

"Yes, an aging potion. We might be staying for a while though; do you understand what we've told you?"

"Yes...I think I've got it."

"Good." Harry said, he leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her forehead. "We'll be leaving in a couple of hours so go get packed." She hopped off of the bed.

"Can I bring Trouble?" she picked up the little gray animal.

"I'm not sure if that's the best idea, love..."

"But we can *leave him!* Whose going to snuggle him at night and tell him stories!" she exclaimed, outraged at the thought of leaving her pet behind.

"*Please* let me bring him!" Hermione exchanged a glance with Harry; she knew that he was going to say yes, he couldn't say no to Cattie. She sighed and pulled her wand out of her pocket, flicking it at one of the many pillows on Catherine's bed, transfiguring it into a small blue pet carrier.

"You can bring him." She told the girl.

"Thank you!" she squealed, clapping her hands happily.

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Now go pack." Harry said, nudging her towards her wardrobe.

They left her pulling outfits out of her wardrobe and throwing them onto her bed next to her newly transfigured red and pink luggage set.

"Let's go get the aging potion." Hermione said as soon as the door was closed behind them. She dragged him up the stairs and into the potions lab then the cupboard, not even pausing to give a greeting to Bronson and Caterina.

"Is it this one?" Harry asked, pointing to a section of shelf full of glass vials filled with a light orange liquid. He recognized it from a potions book he had been reading.

"Yep, that's the one." Hermione answered. The shelf was a little too far for her to reach. He reached up and grabbed two bottles.

"We just need one." He shrugged and replaced one of the bottles. He handed the vial to her and they left the cupboard.

"Just a sip should do it." she said nervously. She bit her lip and pulled out the cork out of the vial, raising it to her mouth. Harry watched anxiously as she swallowed a small mouthful of the luminous liquid. Her nose wrinkled in distaste.

"Are you ok?" he asked after a few tense seconds. Nothing was happening.

"I'm fine but that was disgus-" she stopped speaking abruptly and looked down at her hands, her eyes wide with some kind of horror. She dropped to her knees, her hands flying to her mouth.

"Hermione!" Harry knelt in front of her, cradling her head in his hands. "Hermione baby, look at me." She lifted her head but kept her eyes squeezed shut. As he watched she began to change.

First her hair became longer, flowing from her shoulders to mid-back. Then her arms and legs elongated, then her torso. Soon her body stopped changing and she cracked open her eyes.

“Well, that was strange.” Her voice was different, lower and a bit more flowing. Harry released her face and she slowly stood to her feet.

She looked to be about 26. Statuesque. She had grown at least three inches, now taller than Harry and her clothes fit a bit more snug on her body than they had earlier. She had lost the slight childish roundness of her face, her cheekbones more prominent. Though she looked much the same she was also completely different.

She flicked her wand and her clothing resized itself.

“How do I look?” she asked the stunned Harry.

“Um” he swallowed. “Good. You look...really good.” She flushed slightly and smiled.

“Thank you.” She turned, stumbling slightly, not quite used to her new height, and picked up the glass vial that had fallen to the floor. Thankfully there were unbreakable charms on all the potions bottles and it hadn’t broken. “Now it’s your turn.”

Warily, he took the bottle she handed to him. With a deep breath he raised it to his mouth and swallowed a mouthful of the bright orange potion.

It was disgusting. It was like a mix of rotting vegetables and something sickly sweet.

“God! That’s horr-” he gagged, cutting himself off mid-word.

His skin felt like it was crawling, his muscles felt weak and shaky and he sunk to the floor. It was almost like taking the polyjuice potion. He dimly heard Hermione calling his name but he couldn’t understand what she was saying. His vision wavered and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the swirling colors in front of his eyes.

For what seemed like hours but was probably only a couple of minutes he felt his body changing. Bones and muscles stretching, arms and legs growing longer. It was disconcerting to say the least. Finally it all stopped.

As he came back to awareness he realized he was lying on the floor. He could feel Hermione's hands on his shoulders and hear her speaking to him.

"Harry? Harry can you hear me?" she asked, a note of worry slipping into her voice. He licked his suddenly dry lips.

"Yeah." He breathed. "Yeah, I can hear you." He pushed himself up onto his elbows then onto his knees. He grabbed the edge of a nearby table and pulled himself to his feet, Hermione standing with him.

He was back to being taller than her; she now only came to his shoulder. His once long pants now stopping at his ankles. His hair had grown long again, his bangs now falling into his eyes. He wasn't as lanky as he had been and his clothing was fitting him rather uncomfortably. Before he had a chance to Hermione flicked her wand and his clothes once again fit him.

"Thanks." He blinked in surprise at the change in his voice.

Hermione grinned. "No problem."

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"Is that everything?" Hermione asked from the top of the stairs. Harry turned from the suitcases Manny and DeeDi were shrinking in the entrance hall and towards her voice, jostling Hedwig who was perched on his shoulder. It had been two hours since they had talked to Catherine and they were all packed.

"Just about." He said, smiling. "All that's left is that bag." He pointed to the overnight bag in Hermione's hand.

Inside the small black bag was a magically expanded box filled with the aging potions, a few spell books, and the case of daggers. They had debated on rather or not to bring them, Harry wanted to have them so they could destroy the horcrux, if that's what it was, as soon as they had it in their possession but Hermione made sure to remind him that they would need somewhere that had the right kind of magical protection unless they wanted to destroy whatever place they

were in. He had told her that for all they knew they could find somewhere like that and then they'd be able to destroy it then and there. In the end they had decided to just bring them along.

"So we're all ready?" Harry asked as Hermione placed the bag on the floor. Manny snapped his fingers and instantly shrunk it. Harry picked it up and placed it in his pocket with the rest of the shrunken luggage.

"Thank you Manny."

"Is no problem young Master." The elf said warmly. The two elves had come to bid them farewell.

"Yes, all ready." Hermione said. Catherine came skipping down the stairs, a red and pink backpack on her back and Trouble in his carrier in one of her hands. The head of her bear was peeking out of the top of the backpack. She stopped short and gazed at her parents in amazement.

"You're old!" she exclaimed, her bright eyes wide with shock. She shook her head and dismissed it.

"Are we leaving?" there was no hiding the excitement in her voice. Harry grinned at her enthusiasm.

"Yep! You have everything?" she nodded hastily. Hermione turned to the elves that were waiting patiently next to them.

"We should be back in a few weeks." She said, smiling warmly.

"We keep the house clean for you!" DeeDi said with a wide smile on her face.

"Goodbye young Master and Mistress, little Miss." The other elf spoke, winking at Cattie.

"Goodbye you two, we'll see you in a couple of weeks." Harry pushed open the large front doors sending sunlight streaming into the entranceway. As soon as he was outside he lifted the snow white owl off of his shoulder.

“Follow us overhead.” He said softly to the bird on his arm, stroking her feathers. She hooted softly and nipped his ear then took off into the air. When she had disappeared from his sight he reached into his bag and pulled out the shrunken motorbike, he placed it on the ground and tapped it with his wand and restored it to its original size.

“Bye Manny, DeeDi!” Catherine waved at the elves and followed her Daddy out the door, Hermione right behind her.

“Did you know that Italy is known to have the largest supply of magical artifacts in the world?” Catherine rattled as Harry handed her one of the helmets out of the compartment.

“Really?” Hermione asked her, amused.

“Yep! And did you know they have *two* magical schools? One for girls and one for boys.” The child had a habit of rattling off information.

“No boys allowed. Maybe we should send you there.” Harry told her, reaching for her backpack. She wrinkled her nose and nodded.

“Yeah, boys are gross.” He grinned down at her.

“Remember that.” He placed her bag in the compartment and swung onto the bike, lifting the little girl on after him. Shaking her head Hermione climbed on after them and put on her helmet. She made sure Catherine’s was on correctly and tucked Trouble’s carrier into her lap. The animal had put up quite a fight when he had been put inside of the carrier, howling and scratching, until Hermione had rather gleefully stunned him.

“Hold on tight girls.” He started the engine and with a final look at the large house he revved the engine and zoomed through the gates.

As usual the trip to town was rather short but instead of stopping in the village he kept going. He knew that the nearest airport was at least a three hour drive from town, even on the enhanced motorbike. Or at least that was what DeeDi had told him. At first she hadn’t understood his question, having no idea what an ‘airport’ was. He had to carefully explain to her what it was but years ago she had overheard a conversation between his grandparents that mentioned

the 'muggle flying machine station.' And luckily she had a great memory. She was able to tell him where it was though she had never actually been there. Hopefully he'd be able to find it.

There was only one way they were going to make it before nightfall. He was going to have to employ one of the bike's other special features.

Soon they were out of the small village and onto a deserted road surrounded by fields of high grasses. In the distance he could see the dark silhouettes of mountains and a sign with the distance to the nearest town written in large block letters.

With a deep breath he sped up.

It was thirty minutes before the first signs of life came into view. A small fueling station was the first thing they saw and as they continued down the road cars began appearing. A mix of old buggies and modern cars that somehow didn't fit with their scenic surroundings. The farther they went the more people and cars they saw. Other buildings began popping up and they were even able to spot a few herds of sheep. Soon the town came into view.

It definitely wasn't what he was expecting. He was expecting to see a small tourist trap town much like the one they had just left instead they were confronted with a thoroughly modern city. Well it was a bit too small to fairly be called a city, more like a small village.

Tall metal and stone buildings pressed in from both sides of the road they were on casting shadows on the ground and the people milling around below. At the far end of the street a large white metal and glass hotel stood, the clear blue sky reflecting on its large windows. It was dreary, shadowed place. The sun that managed to shine in between the buildings seemed sickly and artificial in this place.

A large sign reading "**Welcome to Jamestown**" was perched directly outside of the town. The entire place clashed obscenely with its rugged and scenic surroundings. It was like someone had just dropped it out of the sky. There was a surprising amount of people around but somehow the entire place was silent, the only noise coming from the various cars zipping up and down the dark, narrow

roads. Harry wanted nothing more than to drive right through this cold place unfortunately before he could do just that a smartly dressed, pale faced officer stepped into the road and held up a hand, forced him to stop.

“Good evenin’ sir.” He said when Harry had come to a complete stop in front of him. “What brings ya to Jameston’?” he eyed them suspiciously. Harry wondered idly if they weren’t used to visitors.

“We’re just heading to the airport.” Harry answered, smiling casually. The officer nodded slightly and peeked around him and at his family. Hermione was now taking off her helmet. The officer was silent for a moment as he gazed at the small child wedged between the “adults”. She was watching them curiously beneath her helmet.

“Is there a problem?” Hermione asked, breaking the silence. She didn’t like the way he was looking at them. The officer shook his head, giving them a rather wan smile, his eyes still suspicious.

“No problem. We jus’ like ta keep track of vis’tors.” He stepped out of the road and back onto the sidewalk. “Sorry ‘bout that. Have a nice day.” He tipped his hat and smiled again. Harry forced a smile himself and nodded.

“It’s alright. Have a nice day.” Before the man could change his mind he started the engine, Hermione pulled her helmet back on, and they quickly sped down the street. “*What was that all about?*” Harry wondered, thinking back on the way the man had been eyeing them.

Shaking the incident from his mind for now he continued through the small town. No one else spared them a glance.

It took another fifteen minutes before they were out of the busiest part of Jamestown. The large office buildings and flats of the city now gave way to smaller, rural homes. A little ways away he saw a large green sign with the words **Jamestown International Airport** in white and a large white arrow underneath pointing down another, smaller, road. He turned down the road and in the distance the airport came into view.

It looked like a large glass cube surrounded by other smaller cubes. It was a lot larger than he had expected it to be but it was smaller than your average airport.

The parking lot was nearly completely filled with cars and he could already see people milling around everywhere. He pulled behind a ferociously large black SUV that blocked them from view.

"We're here." Harry said, climbing off of the bike. Catherine pulled off her helmet and lifted her arms for him to help her off of the bike.

"That didn't take long at all!" she chirped as he set her on the ground. Hermione climbed off and pulled off her own helmet.

"Nope! Not at all." She grinned. "We should unshrink some of the luggage, it'll be a bit suspicious if we walk in without anything." Harry nodded and pulled some of the tiny pieces of luggage out of his pocket and placed them on the ground. He flicked his wrist and returned the suitcases to their original sizes. As an afterthought he flicked his wrist again and their names appeared on tags on the bags. He swung the strap of a leather suitcase over his shoulder and grabbed the handle of another bag.

"Good lord! What did you pack?" he groaned as he tried to heft the bag. Hermione smiled sweetly as she pulled Cattie's backpack out of the compartment and put the helmets away.

"Just a few books." Harry snorted.

"Yeah, a few." Still smiling she reached down and placed the backpack on Catherine's shoulders then picked up the last bag and grabbed Cattie's free hand, the other still holding Trouble's carrier. Harry hurriedly shrunk the bike and put it in his bag then slipped an arm around Hermione's waist. Together they walked towards the airport.

"Harry?" Hermione asked as they walked across the parking lot.

"Yeah 'Mi?"

"Well I was just thinking...how are we supposed to be married if *you* don't have a...wedding ring." She blushed slightly and fidgeted with the strap of the suitcase in her hand. Harry nodded and smiled. He stopped walking (causing his family to stop also) and reached into his bag.

"I do have a wedding ring." Hermione's eyebrows shot up and he pulled out the small wooden case. He opened it and slipped the platinum band out of it. He met her eyes and slipped the ring onto his finger. She stared right back, her own eyes unusually bright. She smiled brilliantly and threaded her fingers through his. She ran her thumb over the ring, eyeing it a little sadly but still smiling. Without another word she grabbed Catherine's hand and they continued towards the airport. Harry frowned, puzzled. Why did she suddenly look so sad?

"Hermione..." he began hesitantly. She turned and looked at him expectantly. He opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong but on second thought snapped it closed. "Never mind." He mumbled, shaking his head. In a confused and a slightly awkward silence they continued across the parking lot, Catherine looking back and forth between them in confusion.

The automatic door to the airport slid open with a soft hiss at their approach and cold air rushed out. They stepped inside and Hermione made sure she had a good grip on Catherine. There were so many people here it would be too easy to lose her in the crowd, especially with her being as small as she was.

"Looks like we're in for a long wait." Harry said, wincing at the lines of people.

"We're going to stand in line?" Catherine asked, wrinkling her nose and readjusting the back on her back. "That's going to take *forever!*" she threw her hands in the air with a look of utter horror on her face. Hermione rolled her eyes and forced down a grin, as usual the child was being melodramatic.

"Look, we can go and sit down." She said to her, pointing to an area full of chairs by a wall of glass. Cattie pursed her lips dubiously; to her it was still waiting. Just waiting while sitting down.

"You can even watch the planes taking off." Hermione wheedled. It was true, you could clearly see the runway from the seating area. Those bright emerald eyes lit up and she nodded excitedly. She handed the pet carrier to Harry.

"Ok! Let's go sit!" she grabbed her mother's hand and proceeded to pull her over to the only two remaining seats that were luckily right next to the window.

"We'll save you a seat Daddy!" she shouted over her shoulder. He grinned and nodded though he doubted she'd be able to with all the people that were there. He was surprised there were even two seats empty. With a sigh he turned away from his daughter and "wife" and stepped into the shortest line.

Forty-five minutes later he was beginning to agree with Catherine. This was going to take forever. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and sighed heavily, he'd probably already be at the front of the line if it wasn't for the guy in front of him who was arguing with the attendant. From what he could hear the man had fallen asleep or something in the bathroom and had missed his flight, now he wanted his money back. He wasn't getting it.

"I'm sorry sir, it's against our policy." The woman at the counter said politely, for at least the twentieth time. He had to give it to her, the man had been yelling at her for the past twenty minutes and she was still speaking politely to him, the smile was still on her face.

"I don't give a *damn* about your *bloody policy!*" the man roared, slamming his hand on the counter. The woman didn't even flinch. "I want my money back! Now get off your pretty ass and give me my money!" he sneered. For the first time the woman's expression changed. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly and the smile on her face became more of a grimace. Harry frowned. Without thinking he reached over and tapped the man on the shoulder. He whirled around, his flabby face flushed and his sweaty upper lip curled in disdain. He reminded him too much of Vernon. His dislike for the man intensified.

"Excuse me but that was inappropriate." He said coldly. "That is not the way you talk to a woman."

"Why don't you mind your own damn business! This has nothing to do with you!" the man shouted at him. He turned to continue yelling at the woman when Harry caught his arm, forcing him to turn back around.

"You've made it my business when you started shouting like a child and forced me to listen to your idiotic whining." He released him and folded his arms, resisting the urge to wipe his hand. "As I was saying there was no reason to make that kind of comment to this woman. Maybe if you had gotten off of *your* ass you wouldn't be in this situation. It's not her problem that you seem to have had the wrong thing for dinner. So if you're going to continue making a fool of yourself could you do it somewhere else because you're holding up the line." The man gaped at him. He opened his mouth to retort when he saw the cold, calculating look in Harry's eyes. The challenge. He quickly changed his mind. With as much dignity as he could muster he snatched his suitcase off of the floor and stomped off.

"Next." The woman called, her eyes wider than they had been a second ago. With a sigh Harry stepped forward.

"Finally." He muttered. She smiled at him, the smile quite a bit more genuine than it the one she gave the other man. She was a beautiful woman. Dark skinned with thick black hair pulled into a curly ponytail. Wide dark brown eyes surrounded by thick dark lashes and a sweet smile. A nametag pinned to her shirt read "Alice". She looked like she belonged in a magazine, not at an airport.

"Thank you for that, sir." She said, shyly. He grinned and waved a dismissive hand.

"It was no trouble. I enjoyed it." he winked. She laughed.

"What can I do you?" she asked him.

"Three roundtrip tickets to Rome, please. First class." He could afford a bit of luxury. He handed her the passports Hermione had amazingly been able to transfigure, she had taken quick pictures of them and somehow been able o put it all together. He barely restrained sighing in relief when they checked out. She nodded and turned to her computer, tapping a few buttons. She told him the price and he

handed her his card. She caught sight of the ring on his finger and sighed in disappointment. After she gave the card back and he signed his name she handed him his tickets.

“Your flight should be leaving in about thirty minutes.” She informed him. She and another employee checked his bags and the ones Hermione had left with him. They kept the larger bags and Trouble, then gave him back Catherine’s little red backpack and another smaller bag filled with, or course, books and his bag.

With a small wave to Alice he left the counter and headed over to the sitting area where Hermione and Cattie still were. Hermione was sitting in one of the chairs against the window flipping through a magazine on her lap; across from her were two women. Catherine was on her knees in the chair next to her, facing the window and watching the planes with rapt attention. She was the first to spot him.

“You took a long time Daddy!” she shouted over the buzz of voices, causing a few people to look curiously in their direction. Hermione turned and smiled brightly at him, the two women turned also. One had short corn colored hair and hazel eyes and the other looked much like her, though her hair was chin-length. He grinned and walked over to them, Catherine immediately lifted her arms and he picked her up. He knew she was probably too old for him to always be holding her but he couldn’t say no.

“Did you miss me?” he asked her as he sat in the chair, settling her on his lap. She giggled.

“You were right there!” he pouted.

“Aww, so you didn’t miss me?” he whined. She giggled again.

“I missed you.” She said, patting his arm. He laughed. He turned to Hermione.

“The flight isn’t for another half an hour.” He told her. She shrugged.

“Good thing I brought a book.” She grinned, gesturing to the bag by his feet. He snorted.

“Or a thousand.” She, rather childishly, stuck her tongue out at him. He opened his mouth to retort when they called a flight number over the loudspeaker and the two women across from them jumped out of their seats and grabbed a couple of bags from under the chairs and ran out of the seating area. As soon as they were gone a young couple slid into the vacated seats.

“Finally!” the woman exclaimed. “We’ve been waiting for them to leave for fifteen minutes!” she was petite with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair and pale blue eyes. The man, who had to be her husband judging by the rings on their fingers, had short light brown hair and brown eyes. He towered over his wife. They were wearing matching outfits, a yellow polo and khaki pants. The woman leaned forward and stuck out her hand.

“Hi! I’m Claire and this is my husband Kyle.” She introduced them eagerly. He grinned just as eagerly at them.

“Err, nice to meet you.” Hermione said, leaning forward to shake the offered hand. “I’m Hermione and this is my husband Harry and our daughter Cattie.”

“Nice to meet all of you.” She grinned. She bent down slightly so she was eyelevel with Catherine. “Especially you Cattie! How old are you? I’d say...five?” both Harry and Hermione winced when she said it and Catherine scowled.

“I’m seven.” She said coolly, drawing herself to full height, which really wasn’t all that much. Claire only smiled and her and her husband laughed.

“Aren’t you sweet!” the child’s scowl deepened and she opened her mouth to say something she probably shouldn’t. Hermione shot her a look and she kept her comments to herself, still glaring balefully at the woman. Claire looked back up at Harry and Hermione.

“So where are you going?” she asked them, tilting her head.

“Italy.” Harry answered her, silently willing her to leave them alone. Instead her eyes lit up and she and clapped her hands.

“Really! Kyle and I went there for our fourth honeymoon!” she gushed.

“Fourth honeymoon?” Hermione asked in surprise. The older couple nodded.

“We like to go on a honeymoon once a year.” Kyle answered, entering the conversation for the first time. “This year is our tenth year anniversary! We’re going to America.”

“Lucky number ten!” the couple squealed in unison and gave each other a kiss.

“So how long have the two of you been married?” Claire asked them once she had pried her lips from her husband’s face. Hermione and Harry exchanged a quick look.

“N-Nine years.” Hermione said quickly, flashing a strained smile. Luckily they didn’t notice her slight hesitance.

“Really? How nice! So where in Italy are you staying?” Harry raised an eyebrow, he didn’t like this woman. She was too nosy, she reminded him of the simpering women who lived next door to the Dursley’s and used to watch him from their windows.

“We’re not really sure.” He answered evasively. Claire and Kyle continued to smile brightly.

“Well if you’re in Rome you should definitely visit all the boutiques! You will do the most *fabulous* shopping in shops next to the Spanish Stairs.” The woman gushed at Hermione, laying a hand on her knee. Kyle leaned forward and winked at Harry.

“Woman and their shopping, eh?” he chuckled. He gave Harry a hearty slap on his shoulder. “They live to spend our money.” Harry chuckled once in return and exchanged another glance with Hermione. She looked like she wanted nothing more than to tear Kyle a new one. Instead of seeming annoyed at the man’s comment like Hermione Claire laughed along with her husband.

“Well you no what they say-” she began.

"*When in Rome!*" the couple finished together. They giggled and kissed again. Harry suppressed the urge to retch and out of the corner of his eye he could see Catherine giving the couple a disgusted look.

"You're so clever, lovebug!" Kyle said to his wife, his tone almost sickeningly sweet. Claire giggled a high, girlish sound that instantly grated his nerves.

"But not as clever as you, honey-bear!" she squealed in return, kissing him again.

"Well of course." Kyle agreed. She giggled again. Suddenly a voice sounded over the loudspeakers, calling the flight number for America. The couple instantly pulled apart.

"That's us!" Kyle exclaimed happily, standing up and pulling his wife up after him. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a leather wallet. He slipped a business card out of the wallet and handed one to Harry. "It's been nice talking with you! Here's my number, ring us if you ever want to come to dinner with us." Harry took the card, silently thanking whatever deity was watching them for getting these people away from them. There was only so much he could take!

"We sure will." He answered, smiling a forced smile. "*When hell freezes over.*" The couple gave them another smile, and another pat on the head for Cattie, then left. Hermione sighed with relief as soon as they had disappeared.

"I thought I was going to have to curse the both of them!" she snorted. Harry chuckled and threw the card into a potted plant next to their chairs.

"If we ever start to act like that I think I might have to kill myself."

"If you ever start to act like that...*idiot* I might have to do it for you." He chuckled.

"I love you too." The now familiar voice of the speakers called the number of their flight, finally.

"That's our flight." Hermione said happily, getting out of her chair. Catherine hopped off of Harry's lap and scooped up her backpack, fairly bouncing with excitement.

"Let's hurry! I don't want to miss it!" she was already skipping ahead of them by the time they had picked up the few bags they had. They hurriedly chased after the exuberant child.

Twenty minutes later they were seated on the plane. Catherine was sitting next to the window, Harry next to her, and Hermione seated on the end. He sighed and stretched in the plush seat, enjoying the comfort. It was only supposed to be a three or four hour flight but he was going to enjoy every minute of it. Hermione seemed just as keen as he to sit back and enjoy herself; she had already pulled out a book. The plane was completely filled with people, every seat was occupied. The plane sat unmoving on the tarmac, flight attendants walked up and down the narrow aisle checking passengers were comfortable, assuring nervous flyers of their safety and checking that carryon luggage was tucked firmly and safely away in the compartments overhead. One of the pilots was leaning out of the open cockpit flirting rather outrageously with one of them, the other pilot was making all the last minute checks on their equipment.

"How long is the flight?" Catherine asked, swinging her feet and never taking her eyes off of the window.

"Only about three hours." Hermione answered her. She nodded happily. Finally the pilot stepped back into the cockpit and closed the door, after a couple of minutes the plane began moving. It rolled leisurely away from the gates, slowly but surely gaining speed. Catherine was by now bouncing in her seat and Hermione made sure that she was buckled in tightly lest she bounce right out of her seat. Harry checked his own seatbelt and tried to force down the sudden nervousness trying to claw its way through his belly. This was *nothing* like flying his broomstick. This plane sped up and they began to lift from the ground, he gripped his armrests tightly when the plane started to shake. Hermione placed her hand over one of his clenched ones.

"It's just a little turbulence Harry." She reassured him; he scowled at the amused smile on her face which just called her smile to widen.

"I'm not scared." He said through clenched teeth.

"Of course not, love." She giggled. He released his hold on the armrest as soon as the plane stopped its jerky movements and he released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. Soon the plane stopped climbing and he allowed himself to completely relax.

"How long are we staying?" Catherine asked, her face pressed against the window.

"A few weeks maybe." Harry said, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"Oh. Ok." She nodded. A flight attendant walked down the aisle, pushing a cart. She stopped next to their seats, a polite smile on her face.

"Would anyone care for something to drink?" she asked them, gesturing to the tall glasses of sparkling wine and water bottles.

"Water would be nice." Hermione answered her, returning her smile. The woman nodded and took a cold bottle of water off of the tray and handed it to Hermione then turned to Harry.

"Nothing for me." She nodded and turned to Cattie, her smile warmer.

"How about you?" she asked her. The little girl tore her gaze away from the window and eyed the tall wine glasses full of sparkling liquid.

"Can I have one of those, please?" she asked, gesturing to them. The attendants eyebrows rose and she pressed her lips together in an obvious effort not to laugh.

"I'm sorry love, these are for the adults." Catherine pouted.

"All the good stuff is." She grumbled. The woman's smile widened and she reached into her pocket and pulled out a brightly wrapped piece of candy.

“Well *this* is only for pretty little girls.” She winked and handed it to the little girl.

“Thank you.” Cattie grinned, blushing slightly and taking the candy from her. The woman smiled at them again and continued down the aisle.

“I like flying.” Catherine remarked, popping the candy into her mouth.

Just as they thought the flight was three and a half hours long and by the time they had landed Catherine had fallen asleep.

“I didn’t think she’d drop off so fast.” Hermione murmured as the pilot announced, first in English then French, that they were landing. Harry reached over and buckled the child’s seatbelt.

“She was probably up all night again.” He answered. They had caught her on more than one occasion up long past her bedtime reading. After more turbulence, they landed jarringly on the runway. When the plane stopped and they were allowed to exit Harry unbuckled Cattie and gently, careful not to wake her, picked her up. She automatically wrapped her arms around his neck and snuggled her face into his shoulder. Hermione stood on her toes and pulled their bags out of the overhead compartment, handed Catherine’s little backpack and his messenger bag to him and taking the bag full of books. He slung the bags over his free shoulder and tried not to think of how ridiculous he probably looked with the tiny pink and red bag on his back.

“Ready?” his “wife” asked him.

“Yeah, let’s get going.” The heat hit them like a physical blow as they walked down the plane’s steps, even though the sun was beginning to set. After being in the air conditioned plane for the past three hours the heat of Rome felt more intense than it probably was. Harry could already feel himself begin to sweat. They hurried down the steps and into the throng of people. Fiumicino Airport was a massive construction. It was at least two stories high and almost completely walled with glass. The parking lot and side walk were filled with people, you couldn’t take two steps without brushing shoulders with someone else. They trekked laboriously through the crowds and over

too baggage pickup. It took ten minutes to find their bags, once they had them and they had picked up Trouble, who seemed quite disgruntled with them, they were finally able to leave the airport.

"We'll have to take a cab, your bike isn't very...conspicuous. Especially here." Hermione informed him. He shifted Catherine, who still hadn't awoken, and nodded rather reluctantly in agreement. They stepped onto the crowded airport sidewalk where cabs were picking up other travelers. There were more people than there were cabs but after a few minutes they finally able to snag one, right from under the nose of a business man who had turned to talk to curse at another person on the sidewalk who had accidentally stepped on his shoes. He shouted something in Italian at the closed door and from his tone it probably wasn't very nice.

"Dove area noi andando? (Where are we going?)" the driver asked, peering at them from his mirror. Harry had no idea what he was saying but Hermione seemed to know.

"Il migliore hotel." She said.

"What does that mean?" Harry asked her.

"I asked him to take us to the best hotel." He nodded. They moved at a crawl through the thick airport traffic but finally they made it out. Harry could only stare in wonder out of the window of the cab as they zipped through crowded streets. The entire city was awash with color, beautiful buildings surround them that looked more like works of art than anything else. People were everywhere. There was so much to see his eyes couldn't rest on anything. It was overwhelming!

"We're already here?" Catherine mumbled, lifting her head from his shoulder. She looked around the small car then out of the window and her eyes widened. She seemed just as amazed and awed by the beauty surrounding them as her parents. She clambered out of Harry's arms and pressed her face to the window, trying to see as much as possible. "It's so *beautiful*." She whispered. She suddenly gasped and pointed out of the window.

"The Spanish Steps!" she exclaimed. They passed the steps and the driver stopped in front of a tall building covered in vines, plants hung

everywhere around the brick building. **Hotel Piazza di Spagna** was written in curvy gold lettering on a red sign next to a pair of large double-doors. It was fairly simple but Harry liked it immediately. He quickly paid the driver and they stepped out of the cab, onto the now dark street.

“Hold on a minute.” Hermione said as soon as he was gone. She looked around them, making sure no one was looking in there directing and pulled them over into an extremely narrow alley between the hotel and another building.

“What is it ‘Mi?” Harry asked her, concerned. She smiled and reached into her pocket, pulling out her wand.

“Don’t worry, there’s just one more thing we need to do.” After another glance around them she flicked her wand over her head, then his, then Cattie’s.

“What was that?” she asked her Mom, her eyes widened when she realized she was no longer speaking English and her hand flew to her mouth. Hermione grinned.

“It’s a spell, a translation spell, so we can speak Italian like everyone else.”

“Good idea ‘Mi!” Harry grinned. “I didn’t think of that.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” She winked. “Now, let’s go inside before we bake!” she grabbed Catherine’s hand and they left the alley. Harry readjusted his hold on the bags in his hand and pushed open the door to the hotel.

“Beautiful.” Hermione breathed. He couldn’t help but agree. The walls were painted a deep red with light wood paneling, one of the walls was mirrored, reflecting the spiraling staircase the must lead to the rooms. The floors were tiled with an orangish-red stone, a curving marble and wood counter was next to the staircase and much like the outside plants were everywhere. An older woman with silver hair pulled into a bun was manning the desk.

"May I help you?" she asked, a soft smile on her wrinkled face. Harry smiled in return.

"Yes, I need a room for three please." She nodded and tapped a few buttons on the computer next to her.

"Name?"

"Potter." She nodded and tapped a few more buttons.

"How long will you be staying with us?" she asked.

"Err, we're not quite sure...I'll say three weeks?" she smiled kindly and typed that in also. She told him the price and he handed her his card. She gave it back with a key.

"Number five, up the stairs. Would you like someone to bring your luggage up for you?" she asked, indicating the bags he had placed on the floor.

"No, but thank you." She inclined her head. After another smile they gathered their bags, and Trouble, and headed up the red carpeted staircase. They found the room quickly and he slipped the key into the lock, the door swung open easily. The walls were a light blue, the floor marble and a thick Persian rug was in the middle of the large room. A king-sized bed was against one wall, dark wood with a light blue blanket, another smaller bed was next to it. There was a large window with a plushy dark blue chair under it and a vase of fresh flowers sat in the far corner of the room. They even had a balcony. It was simple but striking in its elegance.

"I can't believe we're in Rome!" Hermione exclaimed happily, dropping her bags and walking to the window. You could see the Spanish Steps even from there. Harry couldn't believe it either. He had never imagined himself ever being able to see the world, his entire world had always been confined to the Dursleys, the Hogwarts. Now...now he was in Rome! He was finally living his life.

"Let's go and see them!" Catherine said, pointing to the vast staircase. Hermione laughed at her enthusiasm and shook her head.

"I'm sorry love, we can go tomorrow but right now you need to go to bed. It's already dark out and you're dead on your feet!" Her eyes were only half open and she was leaning on the window sill, the short nap on the plane hadn't helped much.

"But I don't want to *sleep*! There's so much to-" she was interrupted by a yawn. "So much to do!" she turned to Harry, a pleading look on her face. He smiled.

"Your Mum is right, I promise we'll go tomorrow." She sighed heavily but nodded, she knew she was barely awake but how could she sleep now! Harry unshrunk the bags that were in his pocket and she pulled out her pajamas.

"You promise?" she asked, hovering between the door to the bathroom and the window.

"Promise." Harry assured her. She sighed again and padded into the bathroom.

"You know she's going to wake us up as soon as the sun rises right?" Hermione asked, amused. He grinned.

"Then we'd better get some sleep. We have a long day coming." Tomorrow was going to be quite a day. Not only were they going to do some sight-seeing, tomorrow they were going to start their surveillance. Tomorrow they were going to find Emilio Armand.

A/N: Thank you all for reading! Firstly I want to go ahead and apologize for whatever mistake I might've made in this chapter before I start getting all the corrections in the reviews. Now I appreciate y'all nicely pointing out certain things I missed but most of the time I know I've made them. Usually I end up posting the newest chapters as soon as I finish them, which is usually at least 3 o'clock in the morning so I always forget to go back and check for mistakes and I apologize for that. Most of the time I realize what I missed and/or messed up when I'm laying in bed after I've already posted. I'll try to go back fix all those mistakes in various chapters later so they will be changed. I also apologize about the airport stuff if anything doesn't make any

sense, I've never actually been on an airplane so I have no idea what it is people do when they get there, everything I wrote about that is second-hand information. I've also never been to Italy so if my information is wrong there, sorry about that.

Ok, one more thing. I've been getting a lot of reviews and messages saying I made Draco too OOC but frankly there is just no way for him to not be. He's going to be OOC simply because I didn't make him a death eater which he was in HBP. Personally I thought he was way out of character in HBP, I mean how does someone go from being a petty, stupid, irritating bully to being a murderer in one summer! I know, I know the old "His father is a death eater!" argument but I just don't see Malfoy turning from a schoolyard bully into a cold-blooded murderer like that! But that's just *my* opinion!awaits angry reviews

Anywho! Thanks all of y'all for reading and reviewing! Especially the detailed ones, I love hearing other people's ideas and insights on my fic. I'll try to get the next chapter up as soon as I can!

Chapter 23

Sunlight filtered in through the window, its warm caress finding Harry's face. He squeezed his eyes closed tighter and buried his face into the pillow under his head to try to escape its probing fingers. Try as he might he couldn't go back to sleep, with a resigned sigh he forced his eyes open. *"Time to face the day."* He thought grumpily. He blinked, confused at his surroundings, he glanced around the room and after seeing the luggage stacked against the far wall, yet to be put away, he remembered where they were. He stretched in the silence of the room and turned on his side coming face to face with the sleeping woman next to him.

He reached out a hand and brushed a stray lock of hair out of her peaceful face, a soft smile making its way onto his own.

He marveled at how drastically thing had changed between them. They had been best friends for years but they had never been as close to one another as they were now. He didn't think it was possible to love someone so much, to be so comfortable with someone.

They were able to talk to each other about just about anything. He knew she was still hurting from the death of her parents; there had been more than one occasion where she had woken up from a nightmare of the terrible night screaming, crying and gasping for air. He knew even if she didn't say it that she still felt somehow responsible for their deaths, for not being able to protect them. He understood what she was feeling, he was still plagued with nightmares. The terrified faces of the people who had gotten caught in the Death Eater attack, the agonized face of Catherine's birth mother, Sirius...things he thought he'd never escape. They were able to comfort each other, to offer support in ways no one else would ever be able to.

His life had changed so much. A few months ago the thought of ever being able to find someone he loved, and actually loved him back was something of a fantasy. Now he couldn't imagine his life without her, without Catherine. They were his driving force; every time he looked at them he was reminded of why it was so important to defeat

Voldemort. He wanted his daughter to grow up free of fear, he wanted her to be able to live her life without the threat of Voldemort looming over her head, and he wanted them not to have to hide anymore.

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss on her brow. The desire to end it, to finally rid their lives of Voldemort grew stronger every day. If not for anyone else's sake but for his family's.

Quietly, he slipped out of bed and stepped the few steps over to Catherine who was sprawled across her bed, an arm slung over her eyes and Trouble curled next to her. He was surprised she wasn't up already, she must have been really knackered last night not to already be bouncing around the room with her usual excitement. He pulled up the blankets she had kicked off during the night and tucked them back around her then placed a kiss on her forehead. She mumbled something and snuggled deeper into her blankets. He left her bedside and padded to their luggage and pulled out a pair of jeans and a clean shirt. He zipped up the bag and walked over to the bathroom door and stepped inside.

The hotel's bathroom was rather small though not too uncomfortable. The walls were painted the same light blue of the bedroom; the floor had white and blue marble tiles. All the cabinets were dark wood with white marble tops and there was a small shower and tub against the far wall.

It took a long time for the water to warm and when he stepped inside of the shower he smacked his head on the showerhead. He scowled at the showerhead and rubbed the sore spot on his head, he was going to have to get used to his new height. He showered quickly and jumped out of the shower; he dressed and left the small room.

"Good morning Daddy." A soft voice said from the other side of the room. Cattie was sitting cross-legged on top of her covers with Trouble on her lap. Surprisingly she was speaking English; he guessed that if you concentrated on a certain language that was the one you'd speak.

"Morning Kitty-Cat." He whispered, smiling. Hermione was still sound asleep on the larger bed. Catherine pushed the kneazle off of her lap

and hopped from the bed, she padded across the cool floor and over to the window. She stood on her toes so she could peek out. People were already on the sidewalk and street and she had every intention of joining them as soon as possible.

“When are we leaving?” she asked her Daddy, looking at him over her shoulder with her face already alight with the excitement of the coming day.

“After *you* go and get dressed and your Mum gets ready. We’ll have some breakfast then we’ll leave.” She frowned, that sounded like it was going to take *hours*!

“Won’t that take a *really* long time?” she whined, pouting. Harry rolled his eyes and nudged her towards their luggage.

“Not if you hurry.” Her eyes widened and she dove into her bag, pulled out some clothes and fairly ran into the bathroom. The water was running in less than three seconds. Chuckling Harry sunk down onto the bed next to Hermione. He was debating whether or not to go ahead and wake her up when her eyes opened.

“Harry?” she croaked, propping herself onto her elbows and blinking blearily. “What time is it?”

He glanced at the clock on the wall. “A little after nine.”

“Oh.” She yawned and sat up fully. “Good morning.” She smiled at him. He grinned in return and leaned over to kiss her.

“Good morning to you too.” He responded, resting his forehead against hers.

“Ew.” The broke apart and turned towards Catherine’s voice. She was standing in the doorway of the bathroom with he nose wrinkled and her hands on her hips. She was wearing a pair of camouflage green cargo pants and a pink t-shirt. Her curly locks were wild and damp. She moved from the doorway and bounded over to them, plopping down onto the bed next to them.

“Good morning Mommy!” she grinned. “Daddy says after you get dressed we can leave.”

“After *breakfast* we can leave.” Harry corrected. She rolled her eyes and waved her hand dismissively.

“Yeah, yeah.” Hermione chuckled and got off of the bed. She stretched and walked over to the luggage to pull out her own outfit for the day.

“Why don’t we have breakfast at a café or something by the steps?” she said, pointing out the window towards a restaurant they could just make out from their room.

“Yeah!” Catherine bounced off of the bed and over to the window to see for herself. Hermione winked at Harry over her shoulder and stepped into the bathroom.

In less than fifteen minutes she stepped out of the steamy room. She was wearing khaki capris and a button-up shirt, along with a pair of white sandals. She had pulled her dark hair into a ponytail.

“Is everyone ready?” she asked excitedly. She was fairly bouncing as much as Catherine, her eyes bright with excitement.

“Yes, let’s go!” Cattie exclaimed, tying a shoelace. Her hair fell into her face and she impatiently swatted it away. Seeing this Hermione flicked her wand over the little girl’s wild hair and it was instantly pulled into two braids. Harry swung his bag over his shoulder and nodded, smiling at his family. Without further ado they left the room, locking the door after them and headed down the staircase.

“Have a nice day!” the old woman said happily from behind the hotel’s desk.

“Grazie!” Hermione called over her shoulder as Catherine pulled her and Harry out of the hotel and onto the crowded sidewalk.

It was already shaping up to be a warm day and they were already beginning to sweat as they headed towards the stairs. The Steps were only a two minute walk from the hotel and they made it there in

no time, Catherine's enthusiasm speeding them along. The Piazza di Spagna was huge and already crowded with people ready to take in the sights and sounds of Italy. Hundreds of pigeons hopped and flew around the square, scattering whenever someone came too near.

The street was lined with high buildings, high fashion clothing stores, jewelry stores, flower shops, and museums; there was even a toy store. In the Piazza at the base was an enormous fountain. The *Barcaccia*. It was in a round pool of water and in the shape of a small boat. There was a low sort of fence around it with stone benches for people to sit on. At the southeast point of the Piazza was a high statue of two men sitting against a marble column. One was holding a harp and the other was holding two tablets which appeared to be the Ten Commandments. It was Moses and David. A little ways away from them they could see the Spanish Steps.

The church at the very top of the stairs was clearly visible from where they were standing. There were people sitting on the vast steps; chatting, reading, taking pictures, other people were milling in and out of the shops next to and surrounding the stairs, stopping at stalls selling birdseed and flowers.

"This is so...this is so *great!*" breathed Catherine, looking around with wonder in her eyes. Hermione smiled and squeezed Harry's arm.

"My parents were planning a big trip here for when I graduated from Hogwarts." She said softly, gazing around her with a slight sadness. "It feels a little weird being here without them." Harry placed his free hand over the one she had on his arm and squeezed it.

"You're never without them 'Mi." he said just as softly. She turned her eyes away from the world around them and looked up at him. She gazed into his eyes for a second then nodded, blinking away the sudden moisture in her eyes. She squeezed his arm again and smiled warmly; she let go of his and turned to continue down the street. Harry smiled and followed her. She didn't need to say anything, he understood.

They continued walking until they spotted a small café next to a clothing store. Harry stopped in front of it and turned back to his girls.

“How about here?” he asked.

“Here’s fine.” Hermione nodded. Harry took Cattie’s other hand and they stepped up the small stone steps.

The restaurant wasn’t really a restaurant; it was almost a cart though just a bit bigger. There was a stone porch in front of the little restaurant that was surrounded by a low black iron fence with flower boxes hanging from them. There were at least six round iron tables with large green umbrellas over them. A few people were already sitting at the tables drinking coffee and eating hot sticky buns.

While Harry and Catherine found a table Hermione walked over to the cart to get their breakfast. A young, tan man with thick wavy black hair and a wide grin was manning it.

“When are we going to meet the people you and Mommy came here to see?” Cattie asked Harry as they slid into chairs at one of the tables. Harry shifted and ran a hand through his hair. He and Hermione had come up with a sort of plan on the short flight here. They had at first intended to “stake out” the family for a little while, to get to know more about them but they realized that it would just take too much time. Instead of the original idea they had decided to either ring him or go to his office and schedule some sort of an appointment. His business card didn’t give the address to his office though, only a phone number which they haven’t called yet.

“Sometime soon.” He answered her, hoping to defuse anymore questions. They had been surprising lucky with the fact that she hadn’t asked too many questions, she was an almost unnaturally curious child; her mind had been too occupied with going on the trip that she hadn’t really thought to ask a lot of questions. She opened her mouth to ask one when a familiar laugh rang across the “café”. Harry turned towards the cart to see Hermione speaking with the young man.

He was leaning on the cart, grinning at her with twinkling eyes. She laughed again and color spread onto her cheeks. The man’s smile widened and he leaned closer, causing Hermione to pull back slightly. He asked her something and she smiled and turned and pointed at Harry and the little girl who was busy watching people walk up and

down the vast staircase across from where they were sitting. The man's grin faltered slightly and his eyes met Harry's. Said man had to fight hard to keep himself from glaring too hard at the man. If Hermione hadn't been there he probably would have but he remembered how calm she had been about him "flirting" with that hostess. If she didn't let it bother her then neither should it bother him now. There was no reason for him to suddenly feel so...irate. He forced himself to return her smile, even throwing in a little wave for good measure. The man looked away from them and turned back to Hermione; he winked and said something which caused her to laugh again and the flush to return to her cheeks. Harry gritted his teeth. *'This isn't bothering me...not one bit!'* He thought forcefully.

She finally pushed away from the cart, balancing a paper carton and three paper cups as she walked over to the table. Harry clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white when he saw the man leaning out of the cart to watch Hermione's back as she walked over to them. After a not so calming breath Harry got out of his chair and walked over to her and took the cups from her hands, shooting a hard look over her shoulder at the staring man. Catherine turned from the birds and the boy when Hermione placed the carton onto the table and slid into the seat next to her. Harry put down the cups and sat back in his seat.

"Nice guy?" he asked, trying to keep his voice as casual as possible. The woman across from him raised a single eyebrow but nodded.

"Yes." She said innocently and opened the carton. "I got us all some of those buns."

"Mhmm they look good!" Catherine grinned as she lifted one of the gooey, icing covered round golden buns out of the container. Hermione hurriedly passed her a napkin before reaching across the table and grabbing one of the cups.

"Orange juice. If we're having dessert for breakfast I want you to drink it all." The girl rolled her eyes but nodded and bit into her bun, a look of absolute happiness crossed her face.

“So, what did you guys talk about?” Harry asked as he took his own bun out of the container. He kept his eyes on the bun in his hands so he failed to notice the amusement on Hermione’s face.

“Oh this and that.” She said nonchalantly, shrugging and licking frosting off of her fingers. He lifted his head and she pasted a look of utmost innocence on her face. He took a sip of his own juice to hide his frown. He was being ridiculous, he knew that but...it was bugging him so much! He wasn’t surprised that someone else had noticed just how beautiful she was but if it didn’t make him want to just jump across that cart and throttle that man!

“Really? It looked like he was saying something terribly amusing.” He took another sip of his drink. Hermione suddenly began to giggle. He looked at her and his frown deepened.

“What?” he asked, feeling a bit bewildered. She placed a hand over her mouth to muffle her laughter.

“You’re just so *cute*!” she giggled. He raised his eyebrows in confusion. She shook her head and gained control of her laughter, though a wide smile was still on her face.

“You’re jealous!” he blushed brightly and ducked his head.

“Of course I’m not.” He tried to sound affronted but the blush on his cheeks ruined the affect. She reached across the table and grasped his hands in her own.

“Relax, it’s really sweet.” She said, a soft smile on her face. He looked up and met her eyes and shrugged.

“I feel a bit stupid though. You weren’t jealous at all when I...*flirted* with that hostess and here I am acting all possessive because you had a conversation with some guy.”

“But I was jealous.” She said, shaking her head. “I just hid it better.”

“A whole lot better.” He laughed and she joined in. He leaned across the table and placed a quick kiss on her lips. She grinned when he pulled back and Catherine sighed heavily.

“Are you two going to do that all day or are you going to eat so we can see the stairs?”

“Hmm.” Harry tapped his chin and pretended to think about it. “I think I rather do this.” He leaned over and kissed her again. The little girl groaned and dropped her head into her hands. Her parents finally pulled apart, laughing and they continued their breakfast.

They zipped through the rest of the warm flaky buns before throwing away their trash and leaving the little café, the man at the cart making sure to give Hermione an extra wave and a wink.

“Now, let’s go see what we came for!” Hermione exclaimed. Catherine let out a cheer causing people to turn around and stare, quite a few smiling at the obviously excited child. Laughing, they walked through the crowd and headed to the stairs.

They took their time walking up the steps, Catherine stopping every once in a while to turn around to look across the Piazza or point out landmarks to her parents. Harry and Hermione followed behind with linked hands listening to her spew facts about the stairs and talking with her, well whenever she paused for breath. He could barely believe it himself, he never expected to end up somewhere like this. His life just kept changing and twisting, all he could do now was enjoy the ride.

“This is why lifts were invented.” Hermione muttered as they paused again to look at two building at the corner of the right side of the stairs.

“Would you like me to carry you the rest of the way?” Harry teased her, sniggering. She pouted and stuck her tongue out at him which sent them both into laughter.

“Look! It’s the Trinita dei Monti!” Cattie exclaimed, pointing at a church at the far end of the stairs. It was a large white building with two bell towers. There were a few people in front of it taking pictures and walking around. They spent another hour taking in the sights. They were even able to snap a few pictures with the magical camera Hermione had, of course, thought to bring along.

“That was so much fun!” Catherine gushed as they headed back down the staircase and back into the Piazza. On the return trip Hermione nearly took up Harry’s offer to let him carry her. By the time they had once again reached the bottom they were sweaty and thirsty and just about ready to take a break. There was another cart a little ways away from them and there were people around it with drinks so Harry guided them towards it.

“What can I get for you, Signore?” a young girl asked, she couldn’t be any older than sixteen. He smiled at her and peered at the menu that was on the wall of the cart. He had to concentrate before he could actually understand what was written on it.

“Three Granita’s please.” The young girl nodded and tallied up the price. He pulled his card out of his bag and paid her. Once she had returned his card she turned to start on the drinks. A minute or two later she turned back and handed him the three drinks. A Granita is a cup of crushed ice with fresh lemon juice squeezed over it. It wasn’t quite a drink but it was definitely refreshing. They sat down on a low stone wall and started in on the Granita.

“This is yummy.” Catherine commented, placing another spoonful of the icy drink into her mouth.

Hermione nodded and took a sip of hers. “What made you order it?” she asked her “husband”. He grinned and shrugged.

“Lemon and ice sounded safe.”

The rest of the day passed quickly. They looked in on a few museums, went to a chocolate shop, a toy shop (like Cattie needed more toys), and one of the many clothing stores. Now they headed back to the hotel, pockets heavy with shrunken packages and shopping bags. It was a bit after four o’clock, not quite late but Cattie was already dead on her feet.

“Do you want me to carry you?” Harry asked her, fighting down the urge to grin as she stumbled for the third time. He had been asking her that since they began to walk back to the hotel but she was being stubborn, knowing as soon as he held her she’d be asleep. She looked up at him blearily for a second, her sluggish brain trying to

figure out what it was exactly he had asked her. Finally she nodded and lifted her arms. Just as he thought as soon as he picked her up she was out; her face pressed into the nape of his neck and her arms around him. It was understandable that she was so tired. After going to sleep late last night, waking up early, and not to mention the fact that her body hadn't yet caught up with the time change.

"Do you think she was tired?" Hermione laughed softly as they continued towards the hotel. Harry chuckled and shifted her a bit.

"I'm thinking so." It wasn't a full minute before they were back inside the cozy hotel. The old woman at the desk smiled at the sleeping child and gave them a wave in greeting. The little family had only been there for a day or so and she already held a soft spot for them, especially the child. She was such a sweet little thing. Harry and Hermione each gave the woman a wave in return and headed up the staircase and back to their room. Hermione unlocked the door and they stepped inside. He laid his little girl onto her bed and Hermione pulled off her shoes and socks. She flicked her wand over her and changed her pants and shirt to a soft yellow nightgown. She knelt down next to her and undid her braids while Harry turned down her covers. Together they settled her into the bed and tucked her in. As soon as the blankets were placed around her shoulders and turned on her side and curled up; Trouble jumped from under the bed and onto her pillow, settling himself in next to his mistress.

"It's amazing that a child with so much energy is actually able to sleep." Hermione murmured as she and Harry watched the little girl from their seats on their own bed. He laughed and nodded. He pushed himself to his feet and walked back over to the door, where he had dropped his bag when they had walked in. he dug through it and to the bottom where he pulled out a familiar piece of paper.

"I was thinking about Dr. Armand. We need to ring him." He said fingering the business card that was now in his hands. Hermione stood up also and walked over to him.

"Yeah, I know." She sighed and he met her eyes. He knew what she was thinking. Today had been a great day, for a few hours they had forgotten about Voldermort, war, death...they had been able to just

be a family. Now they had to plunge themselves right back into that, they had to continue their search. With another sigh Hermione broke eye contact and reached for the business card. There was a white dial phone on the desk in the far corner of the room and she walked over to it. He stepped away from the doorway and over to Hermione who had sat down at the desk and pulled the phone closer to herself. She took a deep breath.

“Ready?” he asked her.

“As I’ll ever be.” Without another word she picked up the receiver and began to dial. They sat in a tense, anxious silence as the phone rang. Hermione tapped a tattoo on the desk and every once in a while Harry would run a hand through his hair, chewing on his bottom lip. He was just about to open his mouth to comment on how long it was taking when Hermione began speaking.

“Hello is this Dottore Emilio Armand’s office?” she asked politely into the phone, putting on a snooty voice. Though her voice was calm she was still tapping nervously on the desk. Harry stopped touching his hair and placed his palms flat against the desk.

“My name is Helene...” her wide eyes shot to Harry, they had forgotten what last name to use; they very well couldn’t use Potter. He frantically mouthed ‘Evans’ to her.

“Evans. Helene Evans. I was calling to know if it was possible for me to get a one-on-one consultation with Dottore Armand?” there was a brief silence while she listened to the reply of whoever was on the other end of the line.

“Three months?!” Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m sorry but I’ll only be in Italy for the next few weeks and I simply cannot wait that long!” she paused again.

“How much more?” she asked. Her lips pressed together briefly before she sighed dramatically. “Fine.” Another pause. She opened one of the drawers in the desk and pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. She scribbled something down quickly.

"Tomorrow, 11 am. I will be there." Without saying goodbye she hung up.

"Well?" Harry asked anxiously.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Armand at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning." She grinned. Harry sighed in relief. "The only problem is that they insist we pay an extra thousand pounds to move our appointment up." She said reluctantly. Harry waved a hand dismissively, they could easily swing that.

"Where is it?" she pushed the pad of paper towards him. "Venice!" he exclaimed. Hermione was already studying a map that she had gotten from the drawer.

"Venice is a little over a half an hour away from here if we go by train." She murmured, flipping through the map. Harry sighed and threw the pad back onto the desk.

"So I guess we're going on a bit of a trip tomorrow, huh?"

"Guess so." She stood up from the desk and stretched then walked over to her and Harry's bed. She laid down on it and stretched leisurely. Harry pushed away from the desk and plopped down next to her, jostling her a bit causing her to giggle. They sat in silence for a while, enjoying each other's company until Hermione reached over and grasped his hand. She ran her thumb over his knuckles, stopping at the thick gold band on his finger. The same soft, wistful smile she had smiled the day before at the airport returned to her face and she sighed. He turned his head and peered down at her curiously.

"What's the matter, luv?" He asked, his voice low. She shook her head and looked away.

"Come on 'Mi, you can talk to me."

"It's just...this is what it would be like if we were married. Laying in bed together, going on vacations together, taking care of our children..."

"But 'Mi...we do that anyway." She sighed heavily.

“Not with rings!” Harry laughed and shook his head.

“I thought you weren’t ready to get married?” the laughter faded from his voice. She let go of his hand and turned on her side so she was facing him, her head propped against her hand. Harry turned and mimicked her position.

“I’m not...well I am...I just don’t want to have my wedding during this war. I know it sounds selfish but I don’t want the threat of an attack by Voldemort hanging over my head on the happiest day of my life. I want all of our friends to be able to celebrate with us. I want our wedding to be free of any sadness or pain.” By the time the last of her words had left her mouth tears were slipping down her flushed cheeks. With a gentle hand Harry reached up and tenderly brushed the wetness from her face.

“It’s not selfish at all Hermione.” he said. “I completely understand it. We’ll wait as long as you like.” She reached up and took the hand that was still caressing her face and brought it to her lips.

“Thank you for understanding.” She whispered. He smiled a lop-sided grin.

“I try.” He leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on her lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They spent the rest of the evening fine tuning their plan for the next day. They went over everything, every last detail and word planned to the best of their ability. They couldn’t let the man suspect anything. When they were satisfied with the plan they headed to bed.

“Do you think it’ll work?” Hermione asked from her place in Harry’s arms, looking up at him through the darkness of the room.

“I hope so.” He sighed. They couldn’t miss this opportunity, they simply *cannot* lose that chess piece. If worse came to worse and the man refuses to sell it to them there was no doubt in Harry’s mind that he would resort to drastic measures to get it.

The next morning found the Potter family standing on the platform of a train station waiting on a train to Venice. They, or more like Hermione, had decided to have an early start. The sun had only just begun to rise when she had rushed them all out of the hotel and to the cab she had called, getting them to the train station before nearly anyone else.

“Why do I have to wear this?” Catherine whined, fingering the bottom of the black uniform dress she was wearing. They were trying to play the part of an uptight rich family and they were dressed for it. Catherine was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt with lacy cuffs and the dress over it, she had balked at the sight of it but they had been able to, after much arguing, into wearing it. High white socks, black dress shoes, and a white headband on her tightly braided hair completed the outfit. Hermione had donned a finely tailored black suit with a deep red lacy shirt underneath and heels. Her usual slightly untamed curls were pulled back into a tight ponytail and her lips were painted a bright red. Harry had been forced into a casual dark suit with a button up blue shirt underneath. To top it all off he had to take out his eyebrow piercing. Personally he thought it all a bit too formal but Hermione had assured him that it was necessary.

“We’ve already had this conversation Cattie.” Hermione answered her patiently. The little girl sighed and fidgeted, a pout planted firmly on her face.

“But I don’t want-”

“Catherine.” Harry interrupted her before she could get in another complaint. Her mouth instantly snapped shut. She knew when either her Daddy or Mommy used her full name she was walking a thin line and she should probably be quiet.

They waited in comfortable silence, well more of a glum silence on Catherine’s part, until the train *finally* pulled into the station. When the doors of the train slid open streams of people flooded out, dodging between one another with arms full of suitcases and bags, people flowed around them in a sudden flurry of activity. Harry kept a tight grip on Catherine’s hand as to not lose her in the crowd. As soon as

the crowd in front of the train thinned they weaved through those that were around them and hopped onto the train. Hermione found them seats by the window and they were soon off, the station zipped by them in a swirl of gray and yellow.

“Do I get a special name?” Catherine suddenly asked, breaking the silence that had settled over them.

“A special name?” Hermione asked. The girl turned away from the window she had been staring out of and turned back to her parents.

“Yeah, a special name. Like you and Daddy! You said you were going to have a different name for when we met The People.” She said it like it was a title, making quotations in the air as she did. She was right though, Harry and Hermione had each come up with new names for themselves. They didn’t know if these people were even only muggles, for all they knew the Armand’s could be a magical family! The last thing they wanted was for them to figure out who they were. For now they were officially Helene and James Evans and their daughter Catherine. For Harry it was a little strange going by his mother’s name but he enjoyed it, he felt like he was acknowledging the fact that a part of him was an Evans. It felt good.

“Well for the trip your last name is Evans.” Harry informed her happily.

“But I’m still Catherine?” she asked, frowning a bit.

“Yep, still Catherine.” She sighed and sat back in her seat.

“Fine, but I’m going to spell it different.”

Half an hour later the ‘Evans’ family stepped out of the train station and straight into the great floating city that was Venice.

Venice was a truly amazing place. Full of narrow cobbled streets and deep dark canals all twisted and woven together in a giant maze of splendor. Every building seemed as if they were cut out of a history book, nearly every one of them more spectacular and striking than the one before it. Every corner you turned, every step you took could take you through centuries of history and tradition. Fish markets, clothing stores, churches, restaurants, shops full of brilliant colorful

things, all danced and blended together in the graceful and beautiful city. Hermione practically shivered in excitement at the museum of a place that surrounded her. Imagine all the history, both magical and muggle, that you could find here! Harry stared around himself in wide-eyed wonder; this was not at all what he was expecting. From the little he remembered of his muggle geography class Venice had sounded like nothing more than a few buildings floating around and roads where you can only take boats on but *this*! This was beauty! His eyes could barely rest on one thing for a second before it was turned to something else. Catherine could only stand and stare. It was all almost too much to take in!

“Well,” Hermione began, effectively pulling them all out of their reveries. “we can’t stand here and gawk all day. We have an appointment to keep.”

“You’re right. Let’s get going.” Harry agreed. Without anymore discussion they followed a few other people from the train to a wooden platform floating in a canal only a few feet away. It was a landing dock for a *vaporetti*- a water bus. There was a kiosk next to the dock which sold the tickets; a large yellow sign with an arrow on it pointed towards the canal, the name of the body of water written underneath it in Italian. People were standing around the kiosk waiting to buy tickets and quite a few were already boarding the vessel. Hermione had memorized every route they needed to take and just how long it should take them, she had allotted time just for the vaporetti ride.

“Can we ride that?!” Catherine pleaded excitedly. Harry grinned down at her.

“Of course!” she returned his grin and started to walk fast. It only took a few seconds to get to the short line in front of the ticket booth and only a minute or so more before they were at the front. There was an older man manning it with short gray streaked hair, a thick beard, and quite a bit of roundness in the middle. He smiled a wide friendly smile at them as they approached.

“Three, Signore?” he inquired in English, gesturing to their family.

“Si, grazie.” Harry responded stepping closer and handing them man his card. He swiped it quickly then handed it back along with three tickets for the water bus. Harry nodded to the man and they left the stall. They were some of the last few to clamber onto the crowded boat but there was still a seat or two left. Harry and Hermione sat in the free seats and Hermione pulled Cattie up into her lap. It moved slowly but it was an enjoyable ride. Surrounded by the comfortable and excited chatter of those around them, the gentle sway of the boat on the sparkling water of the canal, and the amazing sights of the high and finely crafted buildings above them. It ended all too soon. In less time than any of them would’ve liked they were climbing off of the boat and stepping into yet another crowded square.

“We have less than half an hour.” Hermione said, checking the gold watch on her wrist.

“How far is Dottore Armand’s office from here?” Harry asked her, knowing she probably knew the exact distance. She glanced around for a second, figuring out exactly where they were.

“Only a couple of blocks, we should make it in time.” She reached down and took the hand of the surprisingly quiet Catherine and they continued on their way. They were soon out of the square and in a quieter, less teeming neighborhood. The buildings on this street were all painted in various shades of yellow and orange. Large, leafy trees shaded the neighborhood. They were law offices, posh boutiques, and finally in a pale yellow and white building was Dottore Emilio Armand’s office. His name was embossed on the black door in graceful gold script; it opened as soon as they stepped onto its white stone steps. A slim woman with long wavy bleached blonde hair and deep brown eyes stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a tan suit with a rather short skirt and a pink shirt underneath.

“Benvenuto Signora and Signore Evans!” she greeted them, stepping aside and gesturing for them to enter. “My name is Juliana.”

“Nice to meet you Juliana. Did we keep you waiting?” Hermione asked as they followed the woman into the office.

“Oh no Signora, not too long.” She smiled sweetly. She gestured for them to sit in the waiting area. “Please take a seat, I’ll go and inform

Dottore Armand of your arrival.” She nodded and left the room, leaving them alone in the waiting room. The room was painted in a soft yellow trimmed in white, a white fireplace stood at one side of the room and high backed yellow chairs surrounded it. Also in the room was a half-moon shaped desk where the receptionist, Juliana, had sat. Over the desk on the wall in large silver letters were the words **‘Emilio Armand. Fantastic Expressions.’**

“Do you think this’ll work?” Hermione asked Harry, helping Catherine onto one of the high chairs.

“I don’t see why it won’t.” he slid into his own seat. Hermione sat next to him and wiped invisible lint off of the arm of her suit. The door opened again and Juliana stepped back into the room.

“He’s ready to see you now.” They stood up and followed her from the room and into Dr. Armand’s office. The walls of the office were paneled in dark wood with bookshelves built into them, the floors were covered in olive green carpet, and green lights hung from the ceiling. A large fireplace with two green chairs much like the ones in the waiting room was against one wall. Harry’s heart stopped. Sitting in a glass case on the mantel was the chess piece. He hadn’t expected to see it here! It was almost as if it was there waiting for them.

Facing the door with two more chairs in front of it was a heavy dark wood desk and sitting behind it was a man who could only be Emilio Armand.

He was tall, quite a bit over six feet and thin to the extreme. His thick dark hair was slicked back and curled around his neck, piercing dark brown eyes peered at them from beneath ample eyebrows and a long nose stood out prominently from his face. He was impeccably dressed in a black suit and silky red tie, pointy black shoes showed from beneath the bottom of his pants. Not one hair, button, or stitch was out of place. He would’ve been handsome if it wasn’t for the expression on his face. His thin lips were twisted into a condescending sneer and he peered down his abundant nose down them. His arms were crossed over his chest and he stood as straight

as a board. Harry was instantly on alert, something about this man just put him on edge. Something was off about him.

“Welcome to my office.” He purred in fluent English. He turned his glittering eyes towards Harry. “I’ve been waiting to meet you. Harry Potter.”

A/N: Yay! Cliffie! How I adore them. Sorry for the long wait and the shortness of this chapter, next chapter will be up soon. Thank you for reading and for your patience!

Chapter 24

He froze. He could feel Hermione tense next to him and out of the corner of his eye he could see her take a tighter grip on Catherine and reach a hand into her pocket to grasp her wand.

“What? Surprised we saw through your little ‘disguise’?” the man drawled coldly. “Were you so arrogant to think that no one would be able to figure out who you are?” A sharp click sounded through the room as Juliana left and the door was closed. There was another click soon after that when it was locked. Armand stepped out from behind the desk and began to walk towards them. Hermione pushed Cattie behind her to shield her from the man coming closer to them. Harry spread out his fingers, palms down and ready to block whatever attack that could come at them. He thought about pretending that he didn’t know what the man was talking about but it would just be a waste of time, he obviously knew exactly who they were.

“What do you mean by ‘we’?” he asked, keeping his tone as causal as he could. Armand smirked back at him, finally stopping directly in front of them. His face suddenly began to change. His skin bubbled slightly and became paler, his nose narrowing and curving and his dark hair lengthening and becoming lank and greasy. He shrunk an inch or so and he seemed to gain more weight, though very little. When the transformation was completed Hermione gasped and fully shielded Catherine behind her, Harry raised his hands and gritted his teeth. Standing before them in all his sneering, greasy, glory was Snape.

Hatred burned like fire in his chest and he clenched his hands until his knuckles turned white. It was a trap and they had walked straight into it. *“Idiot, idiot, idiot!”* Harry shouted at himself. How could he have not seen this coming?! It had all been way too easy; he should’ve known that something wasn’t right. He should’ve known that Dumbledore would know where he was as soon as they showed their faces outside of the cottage.

"What? You aren't happy to see me?" sneered Snape, his voice as cold and calm as usual. He seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself; sure that he had complete control over the situation. Harry gritted his teeth again but kept his face blank, refusing to show a hint of the surprise or the panic he was beginning to feel. If it had just been him, or even just him and Hermione he wouldn't have hesitated attacking the man across from them but he couldn't risk a runaway curse hitting Cattie.

"What were you expecting? A round of applause?" Harry said dryly, stalling for time. He spared a quick glance to Hermione, hoping that she had come up with some sort of plan but her face was blank. If he didn't know her face as well as he did he wouldn't have noticed the panic bubbling under the surface of her carefully composed expression. She didn't know what to do and neither did he.

"You wound me Mr. Potter." Snape's eyes glittered even more brightly and he raised his wand to Harry's chest. Something was wrong here, where was Dumbledore? He wasn't likely to send Snape alone to apprehend them; he would want to make sure they knew exactly who was in charge.

Harry shifted so that he was standing protectively in front of Hermione and Catherine, shielding them from the man. Snape took little notice of this. He continued sneering at them, a sick sort of joy on his sallow face.

"The Dark Lord instructed me to bring you back alive and...relatively unharmed. Come along quietly and I assure you your little pet mudbloods will die quickly and somewhat painlessly." Harry froze. *"The Dark Lord? What the hell?"* he had thought that this had been another trap by Dumbledore. How could Snape be here if he was working for The Order. Harry's emerald eyes narrowed. He knew Snape had been a double-crosser; one a death eater, always a death eater. Damn Dumbledore for putting the lives of everyone in the Order in danger because of this man.

Before he could take another step to the family Harry raised his hands and pointed them at him, his face a mask of rage. He didn't say one word. A stream of bright red light shot out of his palms and

flew towards Snape. He hadn't expected it and the shield he hurriedly threw up only reduced the effect of the curse. The *Reductor* Curse hit him in the side sending him flying into the air and to the other side of the room. His back slammed into the wall and he fell heavily to the floor. At the same time this was happening Hermione had grabbed Catherine and fairly threw her under the desk. The little girl wrapped her arms around her head and pressed her face into the floor, a dome of white light instantly surrounded her. She was confused and terrified but she was able to remember exactly what her Daddy had told her to do if they were ever in this kind of situation. Hide and shield yourself.

Hermione was back at Harry's side by the time Snape had hit the wall. Seeing that the man wasn't moving Harry began to head towards the door.

"Get Cattie so we can get out of here!" he hissed to Hermione, pressing his ear against the door to hear if there was someone else waiting outside. He was just about ready to unlock the door when he heard Hermione yelp. He whipped around to see Snape forcing himself back to his feet, his face a livid red and an angry bruise already forming on one side of his face. He fairly snarled at them, eyes wild and full of absolute fury.

"You are *not* going anywhere." He growled, raising his wand once again. A spell shot from his wand and straight at Harry who dove to the side; the bright red light slammed into the door creating a smoking fist sized hole. Hermione raised her own wand and shot a stunner at the man who dodged it. She made to send another at him when her wand was wrenched out of her hand. It flew into the air and towards the doorway.

"Well we can't have any of that." A silky voice purred. Lucius Malfoy stepped away from the door and sauntered into the room. His death eater mask was perched on top of his head and his wand was pointed at them, his dark robes made barely a sound as they brushed against the floor. From where he was standing Harry could see the body of Juliana. She was lying on her side, her face turned up to the ceiling and her eyes blank and wide with horror, her arm extended and a phone was in her limp hand. She must have been trying to call

for help. She had been hit by the killing curse. Beyond the twisted body of the woman were at least five other death eaters. They were surrounded. Harry's mind raced, trying to find ways to escape, to get them out of this situation. Snape stepped away from the wall he was leaning on and limped towards them.

"You won't be able to talk yourself out of this on Potter." He spat, stepping closer. He was so close Harry could smell his robes. A thick scent of herbs and smoke that was not all together very pleasant. He smelled like he had just set someone's garden on fire. He paused. Fire. Remus's first lesson flashed through his mind. He knew how they were going to get out of there. If it was going to work he was going to need the two death eaters to come closer.

"Damn! Now I'll need a new plan." He answered. Harry glanced at Hermione. She was looking back at him in confusion. He looked pointedly at the fireplace and then back at her. When she glanced at the hearth and then looked back at him he looked at the wand in Malfoy's hand then out at the death eaters in the front room. Understanding dawned in her eyes. This all only took a second and surprisingly neither death eater noticed it, caught up in their sure victory.

"Now, now Severus." Malfoy continued, a familiar dangerous smirk on his pale face. "Let us not keep the Dark Lord waiting for his guests." Snape returned the smirk. They both pointed their wands at them. Harry looked over at Hermione and nodded. Before either of the older men could shoot out a spell Harry lifted his hand and flicked his wrist. Hermione's wand and his own flew out of Lucius's hands and Snape's left his grasp. The all flew into Harry's hands. He threw all of them to Hermione who pocketed Malfoy's and Snape's and pointed hers out the door and towards the other death eaters who were beginning to run in their direction. At the same time her and Harry shot out spells. Hermione's *Incendio* flew into the first room and hit the chairs near the fireplace instantly blowing one to pieces and setting the others alight. One of the death eaters had been next the one that exploded and he was pelted with debris; the wooden piece of one of the chair's legs loddged itself into his arm, a fiery piece of fluff landed on his robes and set them on fire, and another piece of debris hit him in the head. He dropped to the ground. More pieces of

the chair hit other death eaters, singeing their skin and robes. None of the few death eaters left paused to check on their fallen comrades, they continued towards the office. Hermione flicked her wand again and the door to the office slammed shut, locking them out. Harry's spell shot out of his wand. It was like a ball of bright silver energy. It flew towards the two death eaters. Snape having better reflexes than Malfoy was able to dive put of the way of the spell but Malfoy wasn't so lucky. The ball completely engulfed him, the only thing you could see through it's light was the silouhette of his body and the last sound they heard was his strangled scream. The globe grew brighter and brighter until pure white light shone from it. Papers from the desk Catherine was still hiding under began to flutter and blow around the room, their hair russled and crackled with the energy coming from the spell. The globe suddenly diappeared. The papers that were in the air fluttered down to the ground and Malfoy was gone. Snape spared a split second to look at the spot where the other man had once been before turning to Hermione and sticking his hand out.

"Expelliarmus!" he shouted. His wand flew out of Hermione's pocket and back into his hands. He flicked it and Harry flew into the air, slamming into the office door and out into the the waiting room, landing nearly on the other side of it.

The room was on fire. The chairs had ignited the curtains and they had burned quickly. The desk where Juliana had once sat was also aflame and the fire was quickly spreading across the carpet and the ceiling. In a few minutes the entire place would go down in flames.

The two death eaters left had been trying to blow down the door to get outside of the building. They had more than likely erected an anti-appartation sheild over the building and sealed the doors and windows to keep Harry and Hermione trapped inside and now they were trapped themselves. They couldn't even shoot water at the fire and put it out because it was a magical fire, it would have to burn itself out.

Harry landed hard on the ground, getting the wind knocked out of him. The knob of the door dug painfully into his shoulder, cutting it. He could already feel the blood running down his back. There were splinters in his arms and more than one of his fingers felt like they

were broken. He forced himself up onto his knees and spit out blood. He had bit his tongue. There was a crash and grunt and he forced his swimming vision to focus on the people still in the room. Hermione and Snape were engaged in a duel. Snape was shooting spell after spell at Hermione who was blocking them all, slowly edging over towards the desk where Catherine was still hidden. Sweat was dripping down her face and she shot him a panicked look. She wasn't going to last long. Hermione was an amazing witch but Snape was extremely powerful not to mention the fact that he had years of practice in the dark arts. This couldn't go on much longer. Harry grabbed what was left of the door frame and painfully pulled himself to his feet, coughing at the pain in his chest and the thick smoke that was filling the room. One of the death eaters turned from the door and caught sight of him.

"Potter!" he shouted. The other man also turned from the door and they both lifted their wands. Harry stood perfectly still as they walked closer, one of them stepping on Juliana's hand without even looking down. His stomach churned and anger ignited in his chest. These men killed people without thought or care. That poor woman probably had no idea what was going on, she had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and they had killed her. They could have easily let her go. With a growl Harry pushed himself from the wall and raised both of his hands, pointing them at the two remaining burning chairs. They jumped from their place by the fireplace and flew towards the men. They barely had a chance to scream before the chairs collided with them. There was a sharp crack as a chair hit one of the men and he slumped to the floor, his neck twisted at an odd angle. The other man was hit in the chest. He was knocked off of his feet and thrown into the desk. It toppled and both it and the chair fell on top of the man. Neither one moved again. Before leaving the room he knelt down next to the body of Julian and gently shut her eyes.

Harry turned and jogged/limped back into the office where Hermione and Snape were still dueling. Hermione was now backed against the desk trying her best to block the barrage of spells Snape was sending at her; even from where he was Harry could see that she was tiring and she wouldn't be able to hold him off much longer. As for Snape he was grinning, a horrible smile that sent chills down Harry's spine. The man was actually *enjoying* this! An all too familiar feeling of

calming cold began to rush through Harry's veins and a grim smile made its way onto his ash streaked face. A tingle ran down Snape's spine. The sudden drop in temperature wasn't the cause, it was the magic that crackled through the room. The very air seemed to pulse with it.

"Get away from her." A cold, calm voice said from behind him. He turned slowly to see Harry. Hermione took the chance to slide off of the desk. Harry's hands seemed to shimmer with a white, blue tinged light. The air around his body pulsed and wavered. "I said. Get. Away. From. Her." the light bulb of the hanging light above Snape's head shattered, raining glass down onto his head. He sneered, brushing away the blood that began to drip into his eyes from a cut the glass had caused.

"What are you going to do *Potter*? Curse me? I can kill her before you even have the chance to think of the correct spell." He spat. As if to prove his point he turned back to the desk to see that she was already gone. She had run over to the fireplace and was now carefully slipping the chess piece out of the glass case on top of the mantle. Snape shouted and made to run after her when a *Reductor* hit the wall next to him, sending wood and plaster raining down and stopping him in his tracks. He turned back to Harry who looked back at him calmly. His usually bright green eyes were dark and the small smile on his face was nothing less than unnerving. Harry lifted his hand and flicked two of his fingers. Snape's wand fell to the floor and his thin hands flew to his throat, his dark eyes widened. He gasped and choked, he couldn't breathe. He turned wide hate filled eyes to the calm teen across from him. He fell to his knees, his face turning puce.

"What? Can't breathe?" Harry asked casually, stepping closer. He kneeled down so that he was eye level with the older man. "Think about how you feel right now. Your lungs are shriveling up, your vision is getting blurry and dark, your chest is burning, and everything inside of you is screaming for air." He came even closer to the man until his nose was nearing touching his. "I want you to remember this feeling. If you ever come near me or my family again you will beg to only feel this." With that he stood up and released the spell. Snape fell weakly to the floor, gasping to take in as much air as possible. His eyes darted to his wand only a few feet away and back to Harry. He

wanted nothing more than to wipe that smirk off of the boy's arrogant face but he was weak, his body so drained he could barely support his own head let alone curse anyone. He'd let the boy think he had won but next time...next time he wasn't going to heed the Dark Lord's request. The boy would die. Never taking his eye off of Harry he reached out and grabbed his wand then pressed it against his arm, onto his dark mark.

"We *will* meet again Potter." He rasped before disappearing. As soon as the man was gone the cold feeling of power began to drain from Harry's body. The faint glow that had surrounded him dwindled and he sagged, suddenly forcefully reminded of his injuries.

"Harry!" Hermione shouted, horror tingeing her voice. He turned towards her and felt an all new wave of panic and fear wash over him. The flames hadn't stayed in the first room; they were now climbing the walls of the office and destroying everything in its path. Hermione was holding the chess piece in her hand; she ran back over to him and grabbed his arm.

"We have to get Catherine and get out of here!"

"I know! The doors are sealed and there's an anti-appartation shield. I don't know how we're going to get out!" Hermione glanced frantically around the room, eyeing the building flames and searching for an exit.

"Get Cattie and I'll get us out of here." she pushed him towards the desk. He didn't bother arguing with her, when she set her mind on something there was no way she was changing it. He limped around the desk as fast as he could to get to his daughter, she was probably scared out of her mind.

"Cattie! Cattie love come on out!" he called as he dropped to the floor on the side of the desk. He could see the little girl's now scuffed shoes from where he was but she didn't move when he called her. Fear rushed through him. Had something happened to her?! He wouldn't be able to live with himself if something had happened.

"Cattie, Catherine answer me so that I know you're ok." His voice shook slightly. She still didn't answer. He crawled across the floor and to the back of the desk where he would be able to see her fully. "*Did*

something happen? Did a stray spell hit her and she was hurt? Or worse..." he swallowed the lump that was forming in his throat and looked under the desk.

"Cattie, please god be-" he choked on his last word at the sight before him. His heart jumped into his throat and his stomach churned. Cattie was sitting with her knees pulled to her chest and her back pressed against one side of the desk, rocking slightly, her eyes fixed on the other side and tears running down her cheeks. On the other side of the desk was the body of Emilio Armand. He had been stuffed under the desk, his back slumped against one side of it and his head lolling to the side. His eyes were blank and wide and his face was twisted into an expression of complete horror. He had been stripped down to his boxers, Snape must have pulled on his clothing. Catherine had pressed herself as far away as possible from the body but the tip of the man's foot was still touching her leg.

"Oh god." Harry whispered horrified. "Cattie, come here." He reached out and placed a hand on her arm. She flinched mightily and turned wide, terrified eyes to him. She hadn't even noticed him.

"D-Daddy?" she asked, her voice raw

"Yes love, it's Daddy. Come here sweetheart." The little girl lifted her shaky hands and grasped his outstretched one's, allowing him to help her climb out from under the desk. As soon as they were free of it Harry scooped the shaking child up into his arms and squeezed her close. She didn't cry. She didn't make any noise she just buried her face into his neck and wrapped herself around him as tightly as she could.

"It's alright; we're going to get out of here." He whispered into her ear. She whimpered and nodded, taking a shuddering breath. After one last glance at the body of the doctor he readjusted his hold on his daughter and stood back up. Thick smoke had begun to fill the room; he pulled his suit jacket over Cattie's head and ran over to Hermione who was standing in front of a window with her wand in her hand. Her hair had fallen out of its ponytail and strands were plastered to her sweat and ash covered face.

"I can't blow any of the doors or windows open." She said, brushing a bead of sweat from her face. "I've tried every spell I can think of, nothing is working!" frustration and not a little fear colored her voice. The fire was spreading and the temperature was rising, smoke was clogging the air. They needed to get out of there.

"I think that they're all sealed. Magic won't get us out of here." Harry answered her. She shoved her wand back into her pocket and walked away from the window, heading over to the desk. She grabbed a green lamp off the top of it and carried it back over to the window.

"Then we won't use magic." She raised the lamp high and swung it towards the window, slamming the base into the glass. With a mighty crack the window shattered. Glass rained down into the alley next to the building and the sound of distant sirens flooded in. Behind them the fire roared, burning through the carpet and licking at their heels. They didn't have much time left.

"You get out first and I'll hand Cattie to you." He said quickly, eyeing the flames behind them. Hermione nodded sharply. She grabbed the frame of the window and hoisted herself up onto the ledge; before jumping out she turned back to Harry.

"Hurry." He could only nod in return. She turned her back on them and jumped from the window. She landed hard on the cool cobbled street of the alley, cutting the palms of her hands on the pieces of glass. Ignoring the pain in her hands she turned back to the window and lifted her arms for Catherine.

With his back to the fire Harry tried to pry the child's arms from around his neck. As he tried to loosen her hold on him she just squeezed him tighter, afraid he was going to leave her.

"Cattie its ok, you can let go. I'm not going anywhere I'm just going to give you to Mommy." Her grip loosened ever so slightly but she still didn't release her hold on him. "It's going to be ok. I promise. Mommy is right there." She whimpered but let go, allowing him to gently lower her down into the waiting arms of her mother. She instantly latched on to her neck, tucking her face into her shoulder. Seeing that the little girl was safely out of the building Harry climbed onto the ledge

and jumped out of the window. He stumbled but was able to grab onto the trellis of the building next to them to keep himself from falling.

"Let's go before the police get here." Said Hermione. The sirens were getting louder, getting closer to the burning building.

"Or before the building falls on us." Harry crept over to the mouth of the alleyway and peeked around the corner, the last thing they needed was for someone to see them leaving the burning building. He didn't see anyone.

"Ok, let's go." He grabbed Hermione's hand and she pulled Catherine closer to her. Without a look back they ran out of the alley. They dashed down the sidewalk and back into the bustling square. The police cars were visible from where they were standing and people were screaming and pointing towards the giant plume of fire and smoke that was once the office building of Emilio Armand. It was now completely alight, burning to the ground with the bodies of Armand and Juliana inside, not to mention the death eaters.

No one noticed the bedraggled family as they jogged across the square and towards the dock for the *vaporetti*, all too caught up in the spectacle of the fire. The water bus was nearly full and it was pulling off, ready to sail down the canal. Harry looked anxiously around the square; the people might not think anything of their state but the police would definitely notice an ash and blood streaked family running away from a burning building. They needed to get out of the square before the police got there, they needed to get on that water bus.

"Hermione, I think we're going to have to run." He whispered to the woman next to him. She bit her lip and glanced from the police and fire cars pulling into the square and the water bus pulling away from the dock. They had no choice. She handed Catherine to Harry and reached down to take off the heels she amazingly still had on.

"Well then, let's run." She grabbed his hand and they ran, full tilt towards the dock. Now people were noticing them. They sprinted through the crowd, ignoring the indignant shouts of those they accidentally trod on or who called at them to stop. They kept their sights on the bus, only glancing back to see if the police or anyone

else was chasing after them. They were gaining quickly on the bus and soon their feet were hitting the wooden boards of the dock. The man manning the kiosk shouted at them but they paid him no mind, they didn't have time to wait in line and buy a ticket. The boat was rapidly pulling away from the dock and they'd only have one chance to try and make it. Just before the boat had completely left the dock they jumped from it and into the water bus. People scrambled out of their way as they stumbled onto the deck and a group of school children stared at them in amazement. Luckily water buses didn't have ticket takers so no one would bother them. There was an empty seat next to an old lady, the only empty one on the bus. Harry sat down and pulled Hermione, who was still holding Catherine, into his lap. He pressed his forehead against her shoulder and forced himself to breathe. That was not supposed to happen; nothing was supposed to go wrong. Snape had been right, he was arrogant and his arrogance had nearly cost the lives of his family. It *had* cost the lives of Dr. Armand and Juliana. He took a shuddering breath and shut his eyes tightly. He felt Hermione's hand slip on top of his and squeeze it. Now was not the time to fall apart. He raised his head and squeezed back.

After a ride that seemed like hours they stepped out a taxi in front of their hotel. When they got off of the *vaporetti* back in Venice they had headed back to the train station. They were in better shape now than they had been when they had left Venice; they had stopped in the station's bathroom and after a few cleansing and healing spells they looked as fresh as they did that morning.

Catherine hadn't spoken since they left the burning office building and if either one of them put her down or didn't touch her she would begin to panic, her eyes would widen and her breathing would speed up. She seemed absolutely terrified. Seeing her so quiet and withdrawn was what scared Harry most; he hadn't seen her like that since her birth mother had died. Having to see the body of Armand must have brought it all rushing back. After paying the driver Harry followed Hermione and Catherine into the hotel.

"Hello! Welcome back!" the old woman said happily when she spotted them, putting down the magazine she had in her hands.

"Hello." Hermione responded, forcing a smile at the kind woman.

"Someone came by looking for you while you were out. A little while after you left." She informed them. They both tensed, exchanging an alarmed look.

"Did they-did they leave a name?" Harry asked. The woman tilted her head and furrowed her brows, obviously trying to remember.

"No, no I don't think so." She shook her head. "He was tall though and very...blonde. I'm sorry that's all that I can remember." *"Malfoy! Shit!"*

"That's quite alright. I'm sorry but we'll have to be checking out early." He said quickly. The woman looked at him in shock.

"Signore?" she sounded extremely confused.

"We'll need to be checking out today." He said again, not a little bit of annoyance seeping into his voice. He wasn't mad at the woman but he knew it was only matter of time before death eaters came swarming all over the place and he needed to get him and his family out before they got here. He couldn't risk anyone else getting hurt. He turned to ask Hermione to go and get their bags but she was already gone, taking the stairs two at a time. The old woman shook off her surprise and reached over to the computer next to her quickly pulling up their record. She typed fast, hurried on by Harry tapping impatiently on the desk. By the time he had paid the bill Hermione was coming back down the stairs with a bag in one hand and the other holding Catherine's hand. The girl was carrying Trouble in his carrier and her backpack was on her back.

"Is that everything?" Harry asked her. She nodded and tapped her pocket.

"Everything." She had shrunken the other bags and slipped them into the pocket of her pants.

"Thank you for staying!" the woman shouted after them as they fairly ran out of the door. The taxi they had left a short while ago was still idling next to the curb with the door open. Harry at first thought that it

was waiting for them but then he spotted the couple standing next to the taxi. They had their arms wrapped around one another and they were pressed so close together you could barely tell where one ended and the other began. He looked over at Hermione and she rolled her eyes in return. They continued walking towards the car and when the couple still didn't notice them they stepped around them and into the taxi. They jumped apart when the taxi's door slammed shut.

"Fiumicino Airport" Hermione informed the driver over the protests of the couple outside of the car.

"Si, Signora." The driver answered. He pulled away from the curb and onto the busy street. It didn't take too long to get to the airport and they were soon hopping out of the taxi and onto the packed sidewalk in front of the airport. Harry picked up Catherine and shifted her to his hip. She laid her head on his shoulder and stared blankly at the people around them, she had yet to say a word.

"Are you ready to go home Kitty-Cat?" he asked her softly. She glanced at him and nodded distantly. Something in his chest clenched, he didn't like seeing her this way. Forcing down his feelings he and Hermione headed for the door. The doors slid open with a soft hiss and they were enveloped in the cool air-conditioning of the airport. They weaved through the throngs of travelers and up to the ticket counter. The lines were long and they were going to be in for a long wait. Hermione glanced at Catherine, almost hoping she would start complaining but she was silent, continuing to look around with blank dark eyes.

Harry spent the wait alternating between glancing at the doors waiting for a death eater to come bursting through them and looking down at the child in his arms. She continued looking around but her eyes never focused on anything in particular; every once in awhile she'd shiver mightily or whimper, a low barely audible sound. Every time she did this Hermione would reach over and run a hand over her head or her back and she would calm. He could see in her eyes it hurt her just as much as him to see her hurting the way she was.

"Next!" the attendant called when the person in front of them had left the counter. They stepped forward.

"Three too Scotland, first class." The man turned to the computer and tapped a few buttons.

"You'll only have about nine minutes to get to the gate." He informed them. Harry nodded and hurriedly slid his card across the desk. The man took it and scanned it in then handed it back, along with a paper for Harry to sign. He did and slid the paper back to the man who immediately handed him the three tickets.

"Bags?" he asked them.

"Yes, and a cat." Hermione answered, handing the man the bag in her hand and Trouble. As soon as their bags were checked in they ran to the gate. Harry handed the tickets to the flight attendant standing at the gate and they sprinted to the plane. They found their seats quickly and soon the plane was taking off. Harry watched the beautiful country disappear beneath him and he knew he'd miss it; in the short time they had been there he had fallen in love with the place. They had to leave though. There was no doubt in his mind that the death eaters would've found them again, especially now that they had the chess piece.

"Do you think she'll be ok?" Harry whispered to Hermione, looking over at the little girl sitting by the window. Her face was pressed against the cool glass but he knew she wasn't really seeing anything. Hermione sighed.

"I hope so...what exactly happened?" she asked. He hadn't had the chance to tell her what exactly had happened, what he had seen when he had found the little girl. He glanced again at the silent child before turning back to Hermione and telling her what he saw. When he had finished she had a hand over her mouth and her eyes were filled with tears and horror.

"Oh god what have we done?" she whispered, horrified. Harry could only shake his head. How could they have brought their daughter into this, they had put her in danger. They were supposed to *protect* her but they had done just the opposite. If she had gotten hurt or...or

killed it would have been his fault. They sat in silence a little while longer until Hermione frowned and turned to him.

“What spell did you use on Malfoy?” she asked him, her voice low as to not be overheard by other passengers.

“It was a transportation spell.” He said in the same tone. “I’m not quite sure where I sent him though, all I know is that it was a thousand miles away from us.”

Two hours later the plane landed with a jolt on the runway at the Jamestown airport. Harry unbuckled his seatbelt and grabbed their bags from the overhead compartment. Hermione helped Cattie pull on her backpack before picking her up and following her fiancé off of the plane. Harry took a deep breath of the cool night air of Scotland. He was home. The family walked down the stairs and into the bright airport. After a quick trip to baggage claim to pick up Trouble they left the airport and began walking across the parking lot. They stepped behind the largest car they could find and Harry reached into his back to get his beloved bike. He placed it on the damp cement and Hermione tapped it with her wand. In seconds the gleaming bike was restored to its original size.

“My baby.” Harry grinned, running a hand over the soft leather of the seat. Hermione rolled her eyes and snorted; she popped open the seats compartment and pulled out the helmets.

“We need a car.” She said. Harry sighed dramatically. This was a conversation they’ve had many, many times. He ignored her and took one of the helmets and placed it gently on Catherine’s head. He had thought that once they had gotten back to somewhere familiar she might begin to relax but she still stared blankly at the ground, her arms wrapped tightly around Trouble’s carrier. He exchanged a worried glance with Hermione. He didn’t like this, not one bit.

He climbed onto the bike and Hermione lifted Cattie up after him, slipping on behind them. He pressed the button on the handlebars and the bike roared to life. He pulled out from behind the large car and peeled out of the parking lot.

He went as fast as he could, anxious to get home. Being out here in the open made him feel exposed, like at every corner a death eater was going to jump out and attack them. They zipped through Jamestown without stopping and kept speeding until they made it back into town. Harry slowed down once they got to the small village that preceded their home, going through it without pause. Once they were out of the town's limits he sped up again. Less than a later minute and he was turning down the familiar tree lined dirt road that led to the gates. The heavy gate slid open at their arrival, recognizing their magical signatures. By the time they had driven down the driveway and were pulling up next to the steps the doors were opened and DeeDi was waiting for them.

"Master and Mistress! Yous are home early!" she exclaimed as Harry hopped off of the bike.

"Our trip was cut short." He answered as he helped Catherine off. Hermione climbed off and took the helmet from her head; she stowed it in the compartment and helped Catherine take hers off before also putting that one away.

"I hope we didn't catch you too off guard DeeDi." She said to the elf. DeeDi shook her head quickly.

"Oh no, of course not Mistress!" Harry pulled their bags out of the bike's compartment and headed up the stairs. Hermione picked up her daughter and followed him. As soon as Harry stepped inside of the house a feeling of immense relief flowed through him, he was home. Here he knew they were safe, here he could allow himself to relax.

"It's good to be home." He sighed, grinning.

He stepped out of the steamy bathroom toweling his hair dry. He was alone in the bedroom; Hermione was down the hall helping Cattie get ready for bed. The little girl hadn't reacted at all to being back home. She hadn't spoken and she rarely made eye contact, she'd just sit and stare at her hands. They were hoping that maybe, in the morning things would be better.

"Well, she's asleep." Hermione sighed as she stepped into the room. She took off her dressing gown and threw it onto a chair revealing a pair of purple silk pajamas.

"Still hasn't said anything?" Harry asked, knowing the answer. She shook her head and sunk down onto the bed. Harry sat down next to her and ran a tired hand over his face.

"I shouldn't hav-" he was interrupted by a shrill scream. Both jumped up from the bed and ran to the door. They sprinted down the hall and towards Catherine's room.

"Mommy! Mommy *please!*" she screamed again. Harry threw open the door and they ran in. The little girl was thrashing around in her bed, her blankets tangled around her legs and tears streaming down her flushed face. They hurried over to her bed and onto it.

"Cattie! Cattie love its Mommy." Hermione called, gently grabbing the child's hands. Her eyes flew open, the bright green sparkling with tears.

"W-where's Mommy?" she sobbed. Hermione cradled her face in her hands and wiped away the tears with her thumbs.

"I'm right here baby." She murmured to her. The little girl whimpered and shook her head.

"Not you. It wasn't you." She looked up at Hermione and shook her head again. "My real Mommy." The hands on the little girl's face stilled and hurt flashed across Hermione's face. Harry placed a hand on her back and she forced a smile onto her face. She helped the child sit up and lean against her pillows.

"D-do you want to talk about it?" she asked her. Catherine's bottom lip began to tremble and she shook her head again. Harry reached over and pushed a few loose curls out of her face.

"It's ok, we don't have to talk about it." he said softly.

"Do you want to come and sleep with us?" Hermione asked her. She sniffled and nodded. Harry scooped her up into his arms and

Hermione grabbed her bear off of the bed. They left the room and headed back down the hallway and into Harry and Hermione's bedroom. Hermione turned down the blankets and Harry placed the little girl onto the bed. They laid down next to her and Harry pulled the blankets over them.

"Nox." Hermione whispered and the lights were extinguished. After a little while Catherine's breathing became softer and she slipped into sleep, her parents following soon after.

No one got any sleep that night. Catherine woke up every hour or so screaming for her mother and crying. They would have to hold her until she went back to sleep. Her entire body would shake with sobs and she'd cry until her voice was raw. Nothing they did could make it better, nothing they could say would ease her pain and it tore them up inside. Hermione would rock her, tears streaming down her own face, feeling worn out and absolutely helpless. Those were the times when it hurt Harry the most, when the two people he loved more than anyone else in the world were hurting and there was nothing he could do about it. The sun was beginning to rise and they hadn't been able to get more than a couple of hours of sleep; right now he was sitting underneath one of their large windows leaning against the wall with the little girl curled up in his arms, her head leaning against his chest. She had been crying for the past hour and her voice was hoarse, her face flushed and eyes red rimmed and blood shot. Hermione was curled up in bed trying to get to sleep.

"Can you-can you please stop crying?" he whispered to her, his voice raw with exhaustion. She sniffled and shook her head.

"I-I can't!" she sobbed. Harry blinked his heavy eyelids and had to force himself to open them again, this was not working! They needed to sleep.

"*Sleep my child and peace attend thee,*" he began to sing softly. She hiccuped and quieted slightly.

"*All through the night. Guardian angels God will send thee, All through the night. Soft the drowsy hours are creeping, Hill and dale in slumber sleeping*" she snuggled closer to him, her eyes shutting.

"I my loved ones' watch am keeping, All through the night. Angels watching, e'er around thee, All through the night. Midnight slumber close surround thee, All through the night. Soft the drowsy hours are creeping, Hill and dale in slumber sleeping I my loved ones' watch am keeping, All through the night." As the last words faded from his mouth the child fell asleep, her sobs finally ceasing and her face for the first time that night became peaceful. He wanted to stand up and bring her over to the bed but he was so tired, he couldn't even force himself to his feet. He leaned his head back against the walls and finally shut his eyes, letting sleep claim him.

His sleep was restless, filled with fire and blank eyes; when he woke up to the sun streaming from the window and onto his face he was just as tired as he had been when he went to sleep. He pushed up his glasses and looked down at the still sleeping girl in his arms, smiling tiredly. At least *she* was able to sleep. He readjusted his hold on the little girl and grabbed the window frame, pulling himself to his feet with a groan. His neck was sore and his muscles felt stiff. *"Note to self: Never sleep there again."* he walked with leadened legs over to the bed and gently placed his daughter under the blankets. He was just about to crawl in after her when he noticed that Hermione wasn't in bed. He frowned and straightened. He had thought that she'd still be sleeping considering the awful night they had last night but she was nowhere to be found. After tucking the blankets tighter around Cattie he walked across the floor and out of the room. He padded down the silent hallway and to the one place he knew she'd probably be, the place she went when she needed to think. The door to the library was ajar when he walked over to it and he slipped inside. The curtains had been pulled away from the grand windows of the room and the breathtaking sight of the sunrise over the vast property was in full view. Just as he thought Hermione was standing in front of one of the windows staring out with her arms wrapped tightly around her torso. He was about to call to her when he saw the wetness gleaming on her cheeks.

"Mi? Whats wrong?" he asked softly, stepping closer and placing a hand on her back. She hurriedly reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Nothing, I'm fine." She smiled shakily, trying to convince him she was fine. He frowned.

"Hermione, I know that's not true. Now tell me the truth." The weak smile collapsed and her bottom lip trembled, she turned from him and looked back out the window.

"It's...its what Cattie said earlier, about-about me not being her real mum." She shook her head and wiped a stray tear from her cheek. "I know, it's a stupid thing to be thinking about at a time like this but..." she shrugged. Harry grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her so she was facing him, looking directly into her eyes.

"Hermione Cattie loves you. She loves you just as much as if you had raised her her entire life. But her birth mother...she'll always have a special place in her heart for her. You are her mother 'Mi and I know that she didn't say it to mean it that way."

"I know and I understand that her birth mum will always be special to her and I wouldn't want it any other way. It's just that I already felt so *helpless*! Like I should've known what to do and I didn't! When she said that it just..." she shrugged again. Not knowing what to say to make her feel better he pulled her into his arms.

"I feel helpless too." He said, releasing her. "The worst thing about it all is that its *my fault*. What was I thinking bringing her along! Now she changed forever, she lost a part of her innocence and its because of me." His voice broke at the end and he blinked rapidly, forcing back the burning in his eyes. Hermione shook her head.

"No, its both of our faults. We *knew* that there was a chance that it could all go wrong and we brought her along anyway! I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive myself for that."

"I just hope Cattie will forgive us." He murmured, turning back to the windows.

It was some time later when they left the library and headed downstairs to the dining room. They thought about getting Cattie up so that she could get some breakfast but she needed to sleep, she had a worse night than them. When they sat down to the table two

plates of eggs, muffins, sausage and tall glasses of orange juice appeared in front of them. Truthfully neither was very hungry and they only picked at their food.

"I was thinking about Snape." Hermione began. Harry put down his fork, his appetite officially gone. Just the thought of the man made his stomach turn and his hands clench.

"What about him?" he asked rather gruffly.

"I think...I think you should talk to Dumbledore about him." If his appetite had just disappeared earlier he was now truly feeling sick. There was no way in hell he was going to talk to that old coot and he couldn't believe Hermione was even suggesting such a thing.

"And why the hell would I do that?" Hermione put down her own fork and folded her hands together in front of her.

"Because someone has to be warned that he is a death eater and the only one who can get him out of the Order is Dumbledore. He's the only one who can get him out of Hogwarts."

"Why should I care about the Order and we're not even going back to Hogwarts."

"Maybe not but Ron is." Harry froze. They still weren't back to being the best of friends with Ron but he didn't want anything to happen to him and Hermione knew that.

"He might not even believe me."

"Dumbledore may be a manipulative, lying, bastard but he isn't a fool. If he knows that Snape is double-crossing him he'll at least stop telling him Order secrets. Snape is a death eater and Dumbledore needs to get him away from the students, away from the Order members." Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He knew she was right but he wasn't going to do it for the Order, he was going to do it for his friends, for Hogwarts. A lot of bad things had happened to him while he was at the school but it would always have a special place in his heart, it had been his first real home.

"I'll do it later today." He grumbled. Hermione reached across the table and squeezed his hand.

"Thank you." He grunted. She stood up and her plate disappeared. "Come on, lets go try and get some sleep." he stood up also and stretched, his plate also disappearing.

"I was hoping you'd say that."

When he woke up for the second time that day he felt different. He got out of bed and stumbled across the room and into the bathroom. He peered into the mirror and his eyes widened. The aging potion had worn off, he was once again sixteen. With a wistful sigh he padded back out of the bathroom and back over to the bed. Just as he thought Hermione was back to her old or more like young self. She slept on with Cattie cuddled in her arms. He glanced at the watch on his wrist, it was already after twelve o'clock in the afternoon.

"I guess I should be getting dressed." He muttered to himself, shuffling over to their wardrobe. He pulled out a pair of jeans, a dark red sweater and a pair of shoes. He dressed quickly in the bathroom and walked softly back over to the bed.

"Hermione." He whispered in her ear. She slowly opened her eyes and blinked blearily up at him. "I'm going over to Grimmauld to call Dumbledore, ok?" she blinked again then nodded, closing her eyes again. He smiled softly and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"I'll see you later." She mumbled a reply then fell back to sleep. Still smiling he left the room, closing the door quietly behind him, and walked down to the family room. He grabbed a handful of floo powder from the jar on the mantel and threw it into the fire. He stepped into the fireplace.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" as he spun through the bright green flames he hoped that Remus and Tonks wouldn't mind him flooing over unannounced. They had told him and Hermione that they could come over at anytime no matter but he still felt a little weird just popping in on them. When he stumbled out of the fireplace he was greeted with the sounds of laughter. He stood up and brushed the ash from his

clothing then followed the laughter to the kitchen door. The door was propped open and as usual the three people who lived in the house were sitting around the kitchen island. All three were bent over four or five pictures spread out on the island and they were all laughing, even Malfoy! He had never seen Malfoy with that kind of carefree grin on his face, he had never actually seen the teen that happy. He coughed politely to get their attention.

“Harry!” Remus exclaimed happily, hopping from the stool he was sitting on and meeting Harry in the middle of the room. He pulled the dark haired teen into his arms and gave him a quick hug. Tonks was grinning at him from her stool and the smile that had once been on Malfoy’s face had disappeared, replaced by his usual sneer. Harry ignored him.

“I’m surprised to see you! I thought you guys were going to be gone for awhile?” Tonks asked him, hugging him as he slipped into the stool next to her.

“We had a bit of a run in and the trip was cut short. I’ll tell you about it later. What are these?” he asked pointing to the moving pictures. They didn’t really look like anything, it was like a moving field of gold with a weird looking black shape on top of it. Both Tonks and Remus beamed at him.

“It’s the baby!” she said excitedly, picking up one of the pictures and handing it to him. “Isn’t it just the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?” Harry looked down at the black shape, it didn’t really look like anything to him.

“It’s the most beautiful blob I’ve ever seen for sure.” Remus laughed and Tonks slapped him on the arms though she was grinning. Malfoy just rolled his eyes. She took the picture and placedd it gently back onto the table.

“So what brings you by?” she asked.

“I was wondering if you minded if I used you floo to make a call?” Remus frowned slightly and nodded.

"Of course but why aren't you using your floo?" Harry glanced at Malfoy before answering.

"I need to speak with Dumbledore and I don't want to risk him somehow finding out where I am. I know he can't enter this house so I figured it would be the safest place to do it."

"Understandable. Take as long as you like!" Remus grinned and picked up another one of the pictures. "We'll stay here and look at our blob. Maybe we should name him Blob, Dorra!" Tonks glared at him.

"Are you trying to scar out poor baby for life! And how do you know its going to be a boy?" laughing he left them arguing and headed back to the fireplace. His mirth immediately disappeared and he grabbed a handful of the sparkling powder. He threw some into the fire and stuck his head in.

"Hogwarts School, Headmaster's Office!" floo calling always felt worse than flooing, the feeling of just your head spinning and your body not moving was disconcerting to say the least; it was a relief when it was over. Just as his "luck" would have it Dumbledore was sitting at his desk already and he noticed him immediately. He left the desk and knelt down in front of the fire.

"Harry! You're the last person I expected to floo me." The headmaster sounded genuinely surprised and not a little smug. Harry resisted the urge to sneer, the man probably expected him to apologize.

"I don't have time for pleasantries Dumbledore, I just have some information for you." The old man's bushy eyebrows rose and the smile left his face.

"I see we are still not on better terms. Very well what is this information you have for me." Harry gritted his teeth at the man's condescending tone. He needed to get this over with.

"While my family and I were taking a trip we had a run in with a few death eaters." Dumbledore sighed heavily, his sad grandfather act turned on full force.

"Oh Mr. Potter, if you would only listen to me I could keep you safe from-" Harry snorted, cutting in on the man's speech.

"I listened to you before and it sure as hell never kept me safe then. Now be quiet so I can get this over with. One of the death eaters was Snape. He killed a muggle man, threatened my family, tried to kill me, and professed his loyalty to Voldermort. I know you think that hook nosed idiot is a spy for you but he is double-crossing you, selling you and the Order out to Voldermort. You need to remove him from the Order and Hogwarts before something bad happens." Dumbledore was silent for a second before sighing.

"Harry I know you have very strong feeling of dislike for Professor Snape but you can go around making up lies like this." Harry stared at the man in wide-eyed disbelief. Was he serious?! Did he really believe he tell him all of this simply because he didn't like the man.

"I know Professor Snape had made mistakes in his past but he is no longer a death eater." The old man continued. "When he was young and naïve he told Voldermort things he shouldn't have but he is a different man now. You need to get over this schoolboy hatred of the man Harry, its not healthy." Harry's eyes narrowed. "*What did he mean by 'things he shouldn't have'?*" Harry's mind suddenly flashed back to the conversation he and Dumbledore had only a few months ago and his eyes widened.

"He was the one who told Voldermort part of the prophecy wasn't he?" He asked, his voice deadly calm. The old man peered at him over his half-moon specatcles then nodded sadly. Harry's blood ran cold. If it wasn't for Snape Voldermort would've never known the prophecy. He would have never come after them. He would have his family.

"You better get that son-of-a-bitch out of Hogwarts or I swear to god you'll regret it." he hissed. Dumbledore's eyes became cold and calculating.

"Is that a threat Mr. Potter." He asked. Harry glared at him.

"Not a threat. A fact. That man will be your downfall, he is a death eater and you are protecting him. You will regret it. Get him out of

Hogwarts before he hurts someone. Plus I'd rather not have to kill him in the school." Before Dumbledore could reply he pulled his head out of the fire. He forced himself to take several calming breaths, to calm the fury and hatred roaring within him. How could Dumbledore protect the man who had pointed Voldermort in his parents direction?! Because of him not only did Harry lose his parents but so did Neville and Dumbledore had let him get away with it! Once he could breath normally again Harry forced himself to his feet. He had to get home and talk to Hermione. He strode back into the kitchen where the family was still sitting.

"I have to be going." He told them, forcing a smile.

"Is everything alright Harry?" Remus asked frowning. Harry thought about telling him what he had just found out but when he saw the happiness in the man's face he couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"Yes, everything is fine I just need to get home."

"I thought you were going to tell us what happened in Italy?" Tonks asked.

"Another time, I promise."

"I'll hold you to it." she reached over and picked up one of the pictures then handed it to him. "This is for you and Hermione," she grinned. He smiled in return and thanked her. After bidding the ado again he headed back into the living room and flooed home. Things were getting more and more complicated, more and more dangerous and somehow he knew it was only the beginning. He needed to get home to his family. On top of everything else there was a horcrux to destroy.

A/N: See that wasn't such a long wait! I hope the DE attack wasn't too random and Snape wasn't too OOC. Also there is a frequently asked question I think I should answer. A lot of people have been asking if Catherine got some of Harry and Hermione's personality during the Magical Adoption and the answer is no, not really. You see Cattie is very outgoing, something neither Harry or Hermione are. She had that from the

beginning (Giving Harry candy when she first met him and talking a mile a minute.) Also she was a reader before the adoption as you can see in chapter 10 when she was reading *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade One* and she spent a lot of time in the library. Thank you all for all of your reviews! Thank you for reading! I'll try to update as soon as I can!

Chapter 25

Hermione was already waiting for him when he stumbled out of the fireplace. She was curled up on the couch looking half asleep. Even after their 'nap' she still looked completely worn out. She sat up and smiled when she saw him.

"Hey." She said. He smiled tiredly and slumped down next to her.

"Hey yourself."

"How'd your little talk with Dumbledore go?" His smile dropped from his face, replaced by a scowl and she frowned. "I take it things didn't go too well. What happened?"

"Happened? The great idiot didn't believe me. He completely disregarded everything I told him! About the attack, about Snape trying to *kill us* and the old man just brushed it off. He actually thought that I had made it all up to get back at Snape!" Hermione's eyes widened and she shook her head.

"He didn't-he didn't believe you?!" she exclaimed incredulously, anger beginning to darken her eyes. Harry snorted and ran an agitated hand through his hair.

"No! He must have a damn good reason to trust Snape because from where I'm standing he has not done *one thing* to warrant any kind of trust. Especially after what I found out." Hermione peered into his face, the furious clench of his jaw and the flare of pain she could see in his eyes. There was more he hadn't told her.

"Harry...What did Dumbledore tell you?" He looked away, staring intently at his tightly clenched hands.

"You know how Voldermort heard the first part of the prophecy?" She nodded. He had told her everything. "Well it turns out the death eater that overheard it was Snape." Hermione blinked, and then blinked again. Slowly anger crept onto her face and she clenched her own fists, eyes flashing dangerously.

"Are you saying that Snape is the reason you lost your parents? That Neville?" she asked softly, angrily. That hook nosed bastard was the reason she had to see the man she loved in so much pain, to see the longing in his eyes every time he saw a picture of his family. Because of him Harry had to grow up alone and unloved. Anger and hatred enough to take her breath away flowed through her and she forced herself to take a deep breath. Not only had the man ruined her fiancé's life but he had tried to kill her little girl. To her Snape was just as bad as Voldermort and he was going to pay for what he'd done.

"Yes and I let him go." Harry hissed and jumped to his feet. His hands flew to his hair and he ran his fingers angrily through it. He had killed those other death eaters without thought but he had let both Snape *and* Malfoy go. He had them at his mercy and he let the chance slip away.

"Harry you didn't do anything-" he whirled on her.

"Exactly! I did *nothing*! I let him *and* Malfoy go!" he was furious but the anger was turned inwards, at himself. Guilt clawed at his insides and a profound urge to destroy something flared through him. He felt the now familiar feeling of refreshing cold flow through his veins and the lamp on the end table by Hermione exploded, raining shards of glass onto her. She quickly ducked and shielded herself from the debris. The anger slipped away from him as quickly as it had come along with the cold tingling in his body and the guilt intensified tenfold. He flew from where he was standing back over to Hermione, kneeling in front of her, not even noticing the shards of glass under his knees.

"Oh-oh god Hermione! I'm so sorry! I-I didn't mean-" he stammered, anguished. Hermione removed her arms from around her head and sat back up, forcing a shaky smile.

"I-It's ok Harry." She tried to reassure him though her eyes were still wide with shock and to Harry's eternal pain, fear. He shook his head, his hands fluttered over her as if to check for injuries though never quite allowing himself to touch her.

"No, it's not ok! I could've *killed* you!" he paled, all color leaving his face, his heart clenching painfully in his chest. The thought of what he could've done, *what he almost did* nearly killed him. He had thought

that this...*power* he had was a help to him, a strength but now...If he lost his temper he could hurt his family, he could kill them. If his heart only clenched before it completely stopped now, pain flared in his chest. Hermione saw the mounting panic in his face and she raised her slightly scratched arms and grabbed his face, forcing him to look directly into her eyes. She took a deep breath and forced down her own fear and panic.

"But you didn't." she said firmly. "You would *never* hurt me. You just lost control of your emotions."

"And what if I do it again Hermione? I could get angry and..." he shook his head, unable to finish his sentence.

"We'll just..." she swallowed and smiled another shaky smile. "We'll just have to work on it won't we?" she leaned forward. "I know you didn't mean to do that Harry." she said softly. "And Snape...he'll get his. As will Malfoy." she pulled away and Harry offered her a weak smile. He didn't know what to say, what could he say? Without another word he flicked his wand hand at the shards of glass that were once the lamp and the pieces flew from the floor and formed back into the lamp. By the time he had finished repairing the lamp Hermione had quickly healed the scratches and shallow cuts on her arms. She reached down and pulled him up onto the couch.

"Did Remus already know about *Snape's*" her face twisted as if saying the name left a bad taste in her mouth. "Involvement in your parent's death?"

"I doubt it. He definitely wouldn't have been as nice to him as he was if he had known and honestly...I couldn't bring myself to tell him." He hurried on when he saw Hermione open her mouth to rebuke him. "I'm *going* to tell him Hermione I just...couldn't. He and Tonks were looking at pictures of the baby and they just looked so happy." He shrugged. "I just couldn't ruin it. Not right then."

"I understand." she shifted closer to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "Did you find anything else out?"

"Not really he went on about protecting me, his usual lies, and that was about it." he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out

the picture Tonks had given him and handed it to Hermione. "This is for you." she took the photo from his hand and unlike him she knew what it was instantly. She squealed and a wide grin spread across her face.

"Oh! It's so *cute*!" she squealed again. Harry looked at her incredulously then down at the picture. Yep, it still looked like a blob.

"Hermione, its a *spot*!" she rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to more than likely explain to him the entire growing process of the baby when a jaw-splitting yawn interrupted her.

"Tired?" Harry asked her, an eyebrow raised, when she blinked the moisture from her eyes. She nodded, glancing up the stairs.

"Exhausted. Cattie woke up a few minutes after you left and once she realized you weren't here..." she sighed sadly and bit her lip, eyes worried. Harry winced slightly and the guilt came clawing its way back. "It took a while to calm her down and convince her you were coming back. She was so *scared* and I couldn't help her." her voice caught at the end and she bit her lip harder. Harry swallowed hard and looked up the stairs where his daughter was still sleeping. He hated the fact that she was in so much pain, that she was so afraid. He had to fix this.

"We need to talk to her." he said suddenly, shattering the silence he hadn't realized had fallen around them. Hermione stood up from the couch and nodded, she had been thinking the same thing. With the thought of his daughter in his head Harry followed Hermione out of the room and up the staircase.

She was still in their bedroom, curled into a ball in the middle of the large bed, her forehead creased and body rigged even in sleep. He had no doubt that she was having a nightmare. Swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat Harry stepped across the room and over to the bed. He gently let himself down onto the bed and placed a hand on the child's forehead. Her eyelids flew open, emerald gaze met emerald gaze and she flung herself into his arms. She buried her face in his chest and wrapped her arms as tightly around him as she could.

"I-I woke up and-and you were g-gone!" she sobbed, her small body shaking. "Mommy said you-you were coming back b-but I was so scared!" Harry tightened his hold on her and placed a kiss on her head.

"Shhh, its ok sweetheart. I'm here, it'll be alright." he murmured to her. She hiccupped and lifted her face from his chest, looking up at him with her flushed and tear stained face.

"Y-you'll never leave me again right Daddy? You'll always be there?" her voice was desperate and choked. Harry closed his eyes briefly, he knew there was no way he could promise her that and it hurt him more that anyone would ever know. He just pulled her back into his arms and pressed his face into her dark curls. He felt a soft hand on his arm and he looked up to see Hermione, her eyes moist. He smiled grimly at her, the lump in his throat shrinking and he took a deep breath. They were going to get through this. The three of them. As a family.

"Cattie." she lifted her head and looked back up at him. "Your Mum and I have something we want to talk to you about." she frowned slightly and looked between the two of them but nodded. She scooted off of his lap and settled back onto the bed.

"We need to talk about what happened in Italy, about your nightmares." Hermione began gently. Cattie paled and she shook her head.

"I-I don't want to talk about it." she said shakily and pulled her knees to her chest.

"I'm sorry love but we have to." Harry said firmly, squeezing her hand. Her bottom lip trembled but she caught it between her teeth and nodded.

"Can you...Can you tell us about the dreams Cattie?" Hermione asked softly. Cattie looked down at her hands and her eyes filled.

"My-my mum." she glanced at Hermione. "My first mum. We were back at the-the mall and those bad men came back and she was screaming and everything *hurt* and then..." the tears spilled over and

rolled down her cheeks. "She just-she just stared at me like *him*." she shuttered, her eyes wide and haunted. She looked up at them. The lump in Harry's throat returned, bigger than before; she looked so *lost*, so scared. "And you didn't come! You didn't come to save me like before and I was all by myself! Forever and ever and I-" a ragged sob cut off her sentence and she bit her fist to keep them in. Hermione reached over and pulled the small girl into her arms.

"You know we never meant to leave you with him. If we had known..." she lifted the little girl's chin so they were eye to eye. "I need you to understand that we will *never* let *anything* like that happen to you again. We will never put you in that kind of situation again, do you understand?" Catherine nodded, some of the darkness leaving her eyes.

"And you'll never, ever leave me?" she whispered brokenly. Harry and Hermione exchanged a pained glance as she once again asked the question.

"Cattie..." Harry said. "We can't promise you that we'll be around forever but we can promise you that we'll try. We love you, probably more than you'll ever know and we'll try *very* hard to be there for you whenever you need us."

She sniffed. "Really?" Hermione smiled softly and ran a hand through the child's thick curls.

"Really."

"Is everything going to be ok?" Cattie asked.

"Everything is going to be ok." Harry answered her. He reached up and ruffled her hair. "Is there anything else you need Kitty-Cat?" She lifted her head from her mother's shoulder and a small, almost shy smile crept onto her face.

"I'm-I'm kind of hungry." Hermione checked the clock on the wall.

"I bet! It's past lunch time and *you've* been asleep all day." She stood up off of the bed, readjusting the child in her arms, and reached a hand down to Harry. He grinned and took her hand, standing up.

“Let’s go, I’m starving!” Harry felt his heart warm when he heard Cattie’s giggle. He knew that it would probably be a very long time before Cattie was completely healed, before the fear would fully leave her but for now...he was happy just to see her smile again. With a warm smile he allowed Hermione to pull him out of the room.

It was dark by the time Catherine had allowed herself to fall back asleep. While Hermione tucked her in her bed in her room, where she had insisted on sleeping, Harry walked the few steps to his and Hermione’s bedroom. They had decided to get the business with the chess piece over as soon as possible.

Harry kneeled down onto the plush carpet surrounding his bed and pulled his bag out from under it. He winced slightly at the twinge of pain in his back. Hermione had healed it as best she could when they were still in Italy but it was still pretty sore. With another pained wince he pulled himself back to his feet and onto the bed, pulling the bag into his lap. With careful hands he reached inside and pulled out the heavy piece of marble and gold.

“Nearly got my family killed for this.” He muttered darkly, glaring at the beautifully carved queen. He had literally dragged his family into the line of fire for this chess piece and he didn’t even know for sure if it was even what they were looking for. If it wasn’t the horcrux...he didn’t know what he’d do. The click of the bedroom door closing pulled him out of his thoughts. He looked up and smiled at Hermione as she walked over to him.

“Cattie alright?” he asked.

“She’s asleep, hopefully she’ll be able to sleep better tonight.” She sighed, sitting down next to him. “So, are you ready?” he ran his thumb over the cool marble.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” He sighed. “I’ll be happy when this is all over.” He stood up and Hermione stood after him. She squeezed his arm.

“Me too.” They left the dimly lit bedroom and stepped into the hallway. The short walk to the third floor was made in relative silence, neither

Harry nor Hermione really in the mood to talk. Both Caterina and Bronson were asleep in their frames when they stepped onto the third floor; they passed the sleeping portraits and entered the dueling room. Hermione cleared all of the cushions from the center of the room, transfiguring one into a solid wood desk where Harry placed the chess piece. They stood on either side of the desk, looking down at the game piece. Hermione took a deep breath and slid her wand out of her pocket. She lifted it so that it was a few inches over the chess piece and began the spell. Her wand wove around it in a complicated pattern. Harry couldn't help but grin as he watched her working the spell; it never ceased to amaze him that she was able to memorize spells perfectly, her intelligence blew him away. Hermione continued the spell until the chess piece began to glow a bright red and menacing black. Harry swallowed reflexively and Hermione shuddered; even after seeing it before the dark aura was still unnerving, it still turned his stomach. Harry clenched his fist. It was the horcrux.

Somehow even with knowing that this was what they had been searching for it still didn't feel like it was worth it. He had thought once he knew for sure that it was really the horcrux he wouldn't feel so guilty and ashamed but if anything he felt worse. It wasn't worth the lives of his family.

"Let's get this over with." He said flatly. Hermione looked at him with sad eyes, knowing and feeling what he was feeling. After a lingering look at the chess piece she nodded.

"Manny." Hermione said softly. There was a sharp crack and the elf popped into existence.

"You called me Mistress?" he asked, smiling brightly. Hermione smiled warmly and nodded, repressing the urge to wince at the title.

"Yes Manny, we need to daggers. Could you get them for us please?" The elf nodded seriously and snapped his fingers. Instantly the wooden box appeared in his small hands. With reverence he handed it to Hermione.

"Thank you Manny."

"You is welcome Mistress. Is there anything Master and Mistress need?" he asked.

"No not right now. Thank you Manny." Harry answered him. The elf nodded again and with another crack he was gone. With the elf gone Hermione carefully placed the ancient box on the desk and she placed her hands on the thick golden latches. With a yelp she jerked her hands from the latches and brought them to her chest, eyes wide.

"Hermione! What happened?" Harry flew to her side. She pulled her hands from her chest and opened them with difficulty and obvious pain; she looked down at them in shock and Harry said a word that Hermione, if she wasn't in pain, would have smacked him for. Her hands were a bright, shiny red and blisters were already starting to appear on her palms.

"I-I think it burned me." She said, sounding strangely thoughtful. Harry gently grabbed her wrists and led her over to the pile of cushions.

"Manny!" he called. The elf appeared next to them with a pop.

"Yes Mas-" his little hands flew to his mouth. "Mistress! What happened?!"

"The latches on the box burned her. Can you get a healing potion from the potion's lab?" Harry asked the elf hurriedly. The fear disappeared from Manny's face.

"No need Master." He leaned over and waved two fingers over Hermione's outstretched hands and the burn began to shrink and disappear. When it was gone he stood back up and smiled with satisfaction.

"The box burned the Mistress because she is not of-"

"Potter blood." Hermione interrupted. The elf nodded, beaming.

"Yes. Only those of the Potter line can open the box, or those who are married to a Potter." He leaned back over Hermione. "Would you like a glass of water Mistress?" Hermione shook her head and stood up.

"No thank you Manny." The elf smiled and nodded at them then popped back out of the room. Harry shook his head and turned back to Hermione to see she was already walking back over to the desk, rubbing her hands together to get rid of the lingering tingling in her hands.

"Well, I guess you'll have to open it." She said. He snorted and walked over to stand in front of the wooden box resting innocently on the desk. After a wary glance at it he placed his hands on the latches. They flipped open smoothly and the box opened. Hermione stood next to him and warily reached into the box for two of the beautiful weapons. Just like before she pulled out Destruction and Purity. She handed Harry Destruction and he gasped slightly at the shocking feeling of cold fire, the feeling of being cleansed. Without a word they each took a spot on either side of the horcrux. He wasn't as afraid as before, this time he knew what to expect but the nervousness still filled his stomach. He looked across the table at Hermione, she nodded once and together they slid the blades across their palms.

Less than twenty minutes later they were clearing the floor of charred fragments of marbled and gold, all that was left of the chess piece. Harry was still grinning from the after affects of the daggers as he dumped the pieces into a small bag. He stood up from his place on the ground and stretched. The pain in his back and the tightness in his shoulders had disappeared completely. He yawned and scratched his head; even though all the pain was gone he was still bone tired.

"I exhausted." Hermione groaned, arching her back and yawning herself. Harry flicked his wrist, sending the cushions back to their places in front of the platform.

"You and me both, I feel like I haven't slept in *days*." He wrapped an arm around her as she yawned again, leading her out of the room. "Why don't you go on to bed and I'll check on Cattie."

"Sounds good." She stood on her toes and gave him a peck on the lips as they stepped onto the second floor. He released her reluctantly and continued down the hallway to Cattie's room. The door was cracked open when he stepped inside. Cattie was sprawled across her bed, blankets piled by her bare feet, and her lion and bear

under each arm. The crystal dragon on her necklace was glowing, creating an arc of light around her bed, keeping the darkness at bay. He padded across the floor and over to her bed. He pulled her soft blue blanket back over her and pushed the dark curtain of curls out of her surprisingly peaceful face. She shifted slightly and her eyes fluttered open, a slit of bleary green appearing.

"Daddy?" she said sleepily. He smiled softly and rubbed her back.

"Yeah its me sweetheart, go back to sleep." He whispered. She nodded and her eyes slipped closed, instantly falling back asleep. He kissed her forehead. "Goodnight love." He quietly left the room, closing the door behind him. He knew it would be a while before Catherine's nightmares would completely disappear but at least for tonight she'd sleep peacefully.

Hermione was already dressed in her pajamas and in bed, damp hair pulled into a thick braid. She was lying under the blankets staring up at the ceiling, her eyes faraway. He could tell she was thinking hard about something by the way her brow wrinkled and she chewed her bottom lip. She sat up when he closed the door behind him, pulled from her thoughts.

"Is she still asleep?" she asked.

"Yeah, like a baby." Hermione nodded and settled back into the pillows. The thoughtful, worried look came back over her face. Harry kicked off his shoes and walked over to the bed then sat on the edge.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She had something on her mind and it was obviously bothering her. She propped her head on her hand and looked over at him.

"I was just thinking about the attack...how Voldemort knew where we were." Harry shrugged and for what was probably the thousandth time that day ran a tired hand through his hair.

"I have no idea. I've been trying to figure that one out myself."

"I think Snape told him." Hermione declared.

“Snape? How would he know anything about it?”

“Because Dumbledore did.” She sat up fully and leaned forward. “I doubt Dumbledore hasn’t been trying to keep tabs on us. I don’t think he’s been very successful before but when we used our real names to buy the plane tickets and to check into the hotel it somehow got back to him where we were. He being the trusting idiot he is more than likely told Snape exactly where we were and the bastard told Voldermort.”

“So basically we led them right to us.” Harry said flatly. He groaned and ran a hand over his eyes. One more thing to add to his already long list of mistakes.

“Next time we’ll cover our tracks better.” Hermione said, firmly. Harry shook his head and sighed.

“I’ll be glad when there is no next time.” He stood up and grabbed a pair of pajamas out of the wardrobe. Hermione opened her mouth to say something but...she didn’t know what she could say. She sighed and settled back into bed, watching him until he disappeared into the bathroom.

Harry stripped quickly and stepped into the shower, the water instantly came on and steam quickly filled the room. He leaned forward into the hot spray and for the first time allowed himself to really think.

He felt like he was slowly losing control. The safe, secure, happy life he had begun to build was slipping through his fingers and he felt helpless to stop it. He squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his fists. He *hated* feeling helpless. He was training and training but he still felt like he was walking into everything blind, unprepared. He had to work harder; he needed to throw himself into his training, he needed to learn stronger and more dangerous spells. He had to learn how to kill. He lifted his head from the water, a new determination filling him. He wasn’t going to let what happened in Italy happen again. Ever.

He stepped out of the shower and dressed slowly, already making plans for tomorrow. He wasn’t going to slack off anymore. Next time he was going to be ready. The bedroom was silent when he left the

bathroom and the lights were dim. Hermione was already asleep when he slid into bed next to her and not for the first time he thanked god for her. Sometimes he couldn't believe how lucky he was to have someone like her. She was beautiful, loving, and smarter than anyone he'd ever known. She and Cattie had made his life so much better and he was going to make sure nothing ever happened to them. He scooted closer to her, wrapping an arm around her and hoped for peaceful sleep.

Harry was jerked roughly from his not so peaceful slumber by a strangled scream. His eyes flew open and he sat up quickly. Hermione was sitting up, pale, hands over her heart, eyes wide, afraid, and full of tears. Her cheeks were wet and she was gasping for breath between ragged sobs.

"Mi? What's wrong?" he croaked anxiously, reaching out for her. She turned to him with wild eyes and shook her head frantically. She kicked off her blankets and began to climb out of bed. "Hermione! Just calm down for a second and tell me what's wrong." His voice was stronger and he took a tighter grip on her arms, forcing her to look at him.

"I-I..." she sobbed. "I have to-to ch-check on Cattie." She pulled her arms out of his grasp and stumbled out of bed, nearly tangling herself in their blankets. She was already out the door by the time Harry had detangled himself from the covers and made it out of bed. He jogged after her as quietly as he could.

"Hermione!" he hissed to her back. She ignored him and yanked open Catherine's bedroom door. Silently cursing Harry followed her into the room. He nearly tripped over Trouble in his haste to reach her. Hermione, tears still streaming down her face, fell to her knees in front of Cattie's bed where the little girl was still sleeping soundly, safely. Her shaking hands flew to her mouth to try and muffle the gut wrenching sobs that shook her body and she leaned forward to rest her head on the bed next to the sleeping child. Harry slowly walked over to the bed and dropped down next to her; he pulled her into his arms.

“Hermione, baby...*please* tell me what’s wrong.” He murmured into her ear, rocking her gently and trying to calm her. She pulled her face away from his chest with a choked sob.

“It was- it was just a dream. Just a dream.” She sobbed, more to herself than to him. Harry pushed her hair from her flushed face.

“What dream? What happened in the dream?”

“The death eaters, they-they were here. I don’t know how they found us but-but they came through Cattie’s window and...” she shuddered. “She was screaming and they were taking her and I couldn’t move! I couldn’t get to her! She just kept *screaming* for me and I couldn’t save her! Then she was just gone and-and” she was crying so hard she couldn’t get the words out. Harry pulled her back to him, his heart aching for her. He looked up at the bed they were still leaning on to see Cattie still sleeping deeply, the dragon still glowing gently around her neck and leaned closer to Hermione.

“She’s alright ‘Mi, she’s ok.” He whispered in her ear. “No one is going to take her away from us. Everything is going to be ok.” He held her for a few more minutes, until she calmed down before gently wrapping an arm around her waist and helping her to her feet so they could head back to bed.

“Wait.” She croaked, hiccupping. He stopped walking and looked over at her curiously. She stepped out of his arms and walked back over to the bed. She lowered herself onto it and placed a shaking hand on Catherine’s wayward curls. She leaned close and rested her forehead against the little girl’s. She closed her eyes and whispered something Harry couldn’t hear. A goodnight? A prayer? He wasn’t sure but after another long second she pulled away and stood back up. After another glance at her daughter Hermione walked back over to Harry and they left the room quietly. Harry paused in the doorway, glancing back at Cattie curled up under her blankets then to the picture window on the other side of the room. The irrational need to check all her windows and make sure they were locked suddenly crept over him. He shook his head and quietly closed the door.

"Are...are you ok?" Harry asked hesitantly as they stepped back into their bedroom. Hermione nodded quickly, a little embarrassed, and wiped away the few stray tears still on her face.

"I'm ok I was just...it was a bad dream." She chuckled humorlessly.

"Exactly. It was just a dream." He squeezed her arm gently and she gave him a grateful smile. They headed back to bed. Hermione instantly snuggled close to Harry and he wrapped his arms tightly around her. It felt like hours before either one of them was able to fall back asleep, Hermione's mind still plagued with the images of her nightmare and Harry trying to figure out how he could heal his family.

The morning dawned with deep gray clouds and rain. Harry cracked his eyes open and slowly began to wake up. He could tell it was still ridiculously early before even checking his watch but he knew there was no way he was getting back to sleep. After he had fall back into sleep last night his dreams had been plagued with nightmares. Images of the lamp exploding and Hermione not being able to avoid the raining shards of glass, blood dripping onto the floor and wide frightened eyes. There was Cattie under that desk but instead of Armand staring back at him with blank, empty eyes it was his little girl. He swallowed hard to force down the bile he could feel rising in his throat and slid out of bed. He forced the images away and padded across the cool wood floor to the wardrobe. He grabbed a pair of jeans, a white t-shirt and his shoes and took a quick morning shower.

When he stepped out of the bathroom Hermione was still sleeping so he quietly left the room. The only sound in the house was the soft pitter-patter of the rain on the roof and his own footsteps. He checked in on Cattie who was still sound asleep before heading down to the dining room.

Before he even sat down at the table a plate of hotcakes drenched in syrup and a steaming cup of tea appeared on the table. He grinned and sent a silent thanks to DeeDi. He sat down to his quiet breakfast, facing the glass wall of the dining room. Even with the rain and gray skies the view was still beautiful. He ate slowly, savoring each bite before letting it slide down his throat. He made plans for the rest of

the day while he finished his tea; the one thing he knew he had to do for sure was talk to Remus.

His plate and cup disappeared after he set it back on the table and he pushed away from the table. Just as he was getting ready to leave the room the soft sound of feet slapping against the wooden floor reached his ears. He looked up to see Cattie standing in the doorway, rubbing her eyes, hair sleep tousled, and still dressed in her favorite pair of yellow and purple flowered pajamas. He grinned. She was so cute.

“Morning Kitty-Cat. Did you sleep well?” she looked up at him with bleary eyes, obviously still half asleep, and nodded. She wrapped her small arms around his leg and leaned her head against his hip, yawning.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, placing a hand on top her head. She nodded but didn’t released her hold on his leg. He bent over so he could see her face and had to bite back a grin. She had fallen back asleep. He carefully pried her arms from around his leg and scooped her into his arms. Her eyes opened and she looked up at him in confusion.

“Where are we going?” she asked sleepily.

“I am going to put *you* back to bed.” He turned to bring her back to her room but she shook her head frantically and looked at him with wide eyes.

“No! Please Daddy I had a bad dream...I don’t want to go back to sleep.” She gave him her best puppy-dog look, the one that almost never failed when it came to her Daddy, it never worked on her Mommy. He shook his head but put her back on the floor.

“Fine, you can stay up. Let’s get you some breakfast.” She beamed happily and climbed into one of the dining chairs. A steaming plate of hotcakes and a tall glass of cool pumpkin juice appeared in front of her. She took a big bit of the fluffy cakes then looked up at her Daddy expectantly. He rolled his eyes playfully but sat back down. Another glass of pumpkin juice popped into existence in front of him.

“So, what are your plans for today?” he asked her as he watched her shovel down her breakfast. She swallowed a mouthful of food before answering.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. She suddenly brightened, eyes twinkling. “Can we swim today Daddy?” she asked excitedly.

“I don’t see why not.” She squealed and continued shoveling in food with even more vigor than before. The weight that had been on his chest since they had left Italy lifted slightly seeing her so happy. He hated seeing that quiet scared child she had turned into.

“Slow down please love, we don’t want you to choke.” A tired voice said from the doorway. Cattie and Harry turned towards the voice to see Hermione stepping into the room, already dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved red shirt. Cattie nodded and slowed down.

“Morning Mommy!” she chirped once she had swallowed, definitely more awake than she had been earlier. “Daddy said we can swim today.”

“Really? Is Daddy going to swim with us?” Hermione teased, sliding into a seat next to her daughter. Catherine giggled and nodded promptly.

“Yep, we’re going to make him.” She stuck her tongue out at Harry and giggled again.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” he grumbled, lips twitching. Both his girls gave him a stern look and shook their heads.

“No you don’t.” Hermione grinned. Her own plate of breakfast popped in front of her and she, much slower than Cattie, dug in.

After breakfast Hermione sent Cattie upstairs to get dressed for the day. They had decided they’d swim sometime after lunch which Cattie wasn’t too happy about. She accepted it though after Hermione told her she was going to teach her some new spells today. At first Harry and Hermione were only going to teach her to shield herself but she was even more adept at magic than either one of them had thought. She breezed through the simple shielding spells they had

taught her like they were nothing and she was begging to learn anything and everything they could possibly teach her.

"She knows more than your average third year." Hermione commented as they watched the little girl climb the stairs. Harry grinned proudly.

"She's your daughter." Hermione grinned in return.

"True. So, where are you going?" she asked, eyeing his shoes. Harry put down the glass of pumpkin juice in his hand and sighed.

"I have to speak with Remus."

"You're going to tell him about Snape?" he pressed his lips together and nodded. He figured he should get it over with as soon as possible.

"Did you sleep well after...you know" he asked as he pushed away from the table. Hermione drank the last of her cup of tea and stood up also, heading for the door. She bit her lip and nodded.

"For the most part." She sighed. "I don't think I've ever been that afraid before." She said softly. "It just felt so *real*." Harry placed a hand on her back, pulling her closer.

"But it wasn't. Cattie is ok and that in *not* going to happen." He said firmly.

"Not if I can help it." Cattie came bouncing back down the staircase, Trouble trailing leisurely behind, just as they stepped into the hallway. She was dressed in jeans with yellow butterflies on the pockets and a yellow shirt. She had even pulled her hair into a rather fluffy ponytail.

"I'm ready Mommy." She said, hopping off the last step.

"Good, we can get started as soon as you say goodbye to Daddy." The child frowned and looked at Harry with wide eyes.

"Where are you going?!" Harry smiled reassuringly.

"I'm only going to visit Uncle Moony, I'll be back before lunch." She eyed him for a second before nodding slowly.

"Ok, but you better come back!" she leaned forward and hugged him around the waist. "See you later Daddy." He leaned forward and kissed her soundly on the forehead.

"See you later Kitty-Cat." She released him and he leaned over to kiss Hermione. They ignored the usual 'ew' from Cattie. He pulled away and grinned at her.

"See you later 'Mi"

"See you later Harry." He waved at them before stepping into the family room. He could hear them climbing the stairs while he grabbed a handful of floo powder from the mantel. Cattie was questioning Hermione about fire spells, trying to convince her to teach her.

"No! I will not teach them to you, no way."

"Why not?" the child persisted.

"Because they're dangerous. Don't try that look on me, you know it doesn't work." He was still laughing when he stepped into the now bright green flames.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" he gritted his teeth against the urge to retch as the word spun around him. He'd have to remember never to eat before flooing again.

The room wasn't empty as he expected when he stumbled out of the fire. Malfoy had jumped to his feet when he saw the floo flare green, an anxious look on his face. His face darkened and he rolled his eyes when he saw who it was.

"What are you doing here Potter?" he grumbled without much venom. He sat back down on the couch and picked up the book he had dropped. Harry glared at the other boy and dusted the ash from his clothes.

"I'm not here to see you Malfoy. Where are Remus and Tonks?" the dark look dropped from Draco's face replaced by something close to worry.

"They're not here. They went to St. Mungo's a few hours ago." Harry stopped glaring at him and stepped farther into the room.

"St. Mungo's? What happened?" he asked frantically. Malfoy brushed his too long bang out of his eyes and sighed heavily.

"I'm not sure. Tonks woke up this morning and she said she felt weird and she was...bigger than she was last night."

"Bigger? What do you mean bigger?" Malfoy rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"Bigger Potter! Larger, not small! They went to St. Mungo's to make sure she was ok." Harry dropped into an armchair across from Malfoy and shot him a glare.

"Why didn't you go with them?" Malfoy snorted and sneered.

"Yeah and someone sees me and tips off my father and he shows up to 'reclaim me'? Brilliant idea Potter." Harry gritted his teeth and grabbed the arms of the chair to keep himself from launching across the small space between them and wiping the sneer off Malfoy's face.

"I doubt that's the only reason you didn't go. You probably don't give a shit about what happens to Tonks or the baby." He shot back. Draco seemed stunned for a second; Harry could see his knuckles turn white and his teeth clench.

"Despite what you may think *Potter*," he spat, his voice cold. "I'm not a complete bastard. I care about Tonks and Remus. They took me in and they've been more parents to me than my own. Just because I'm not on bended knee kissing *your* ass doesn't mean I'm not grateful for them taking care of me. Now I really don't give a shit about what you think of me but I'm not going to sit here and let you talk about something you know nothing of." Before Harry could even think of what to say the fireplace flared to life with bright green flames. Both boys jumped from their seats as Remus stepped out of the fireplace.

“Remus! Is everything ok?” Draco asked, quickly stepping over to the man. Remus grinned and nodded, squeezing the younger man’s shoulder.

“Yes, everything is just fine.” The fire flared green again and Tonks stumbled out, Remus caught her before she could hit the floor. Harry’s eyebrows shot up when he got a good look at her. Malfoy was right, she was bigger. The barely noticeable bulge that had been there yesterday was definitely visible now. Instead of looking like she was three months pregnant like she should she looked to already be in her fifth month. The bright pink shirt she wore barely covered her stomach.

“Harry!” Remus exclaimed, noticing him for the first time. “What are you doing here? Did Draco floo call you?” said boy snorted and Harry shot him a dark look.

“No, I came by to talk to you guys about something.” He turned to Tonks, looking at her in concern. “Are you ok?” she nodded, grinning.

“I’m perfectly fine.” She placed a hand on her stomach. “We both are.” Remus led her over to the armchair Harry had vacated. She sat down gratefully and Remus sat on the arm of the chair. Draco and Harry were forced to share the couch.

“What did the MediWizard say?” Malfoy asked the couple, leaning forward.

“Well,” Tonks began. “It seems that because of the werewolf blood the baby has he’s growing a bit faster than your average baby. He should be here in November instead of February.”

“He?!” Harry and Draco exclaimed in unison. The older couple grinned, Remus even wider than Tonks.

“Yep, we’re having a boy!” Draco broke into a grin, the first genuinely happy one Harry had ever seen on his face, and stood up to hug Tonks.

“Wow that’s...that’s great! Congratulations.” He congratulated them.

“Thank you Draco.” Remus grinned. Harry stood up also and hugged them both.

“Congratulations! I guess we won’t have to say ‘it’ anymore.” Tonks slapped him on the arm.

“So, what else did the MediWizard say?” Draco asked, settling back onto the couch. Harry reluctantly sat next to him.

“He said that once he’s born he’ll grow normally physically but he’ll learn to talk, and walk and such earlier than usual. By the time he’s one that’ll all stop and he’ll grow the way he should.” Remus answered. They talked a bit more about the baby before Remus turned to Harry curiously.

“What was it you needed to talk to us about, Harry?” Harry looked at the assembled people and once again debated rather or not to tell them, he knew this would ruin the happy mood everyone was in. No, he wasn’t going to chicken out this time.

“Yeah...I wanted to tell you what happened in Italy.” Tonks and Remus frowned at the subdued tone of his voice and even Malfoy looked slightly interested. Truthfully he didn’t really want to talk about it in front of the other teen but on some level Malfoy had as much right to know about what happened, especially since his father was involved. With a deep breath to steel himself he launched into his story.

It seemed to take hours to tell the story and talking about it brought it all back. He could tell that Remus and Tonks were horrified but Malfoy’s face stayed as still as stone. Well that was until Harry spoke of his father.

“My father killed her?” he asked, voice emotionless when Harry spoke of seeing Juliana’s body.

“I think so.” Harry answered him. The boy nodded and looked away. After a second Harry continued his story. The room was completely silent when he finished. Tonks had tears streaming down her face and Remus was staring fixedly at his hands, his face pale. Malfoy wasn’t looking at any of them, he seemed to be caught up in his

thoughts, no doubt thinking about his father. Harry took a shaky breath and forced himself to tell the one thing he was hesitant to say.

"There's something else...When I came over and I talked to Dumbledore and..." Remus looked up at him, he knew that this was something important.

"Well I found out something. Do you remember when I told you about the prophesy and how Voldemort found out where my parents were?" the older man nodded. "It turns out Snape was the one who told him." At first Harry wasn't sure Remus had heard him but then his face slowly began to change. His teeth clenched and his eyes narrowed, the usual warm amber color darkening into a near black gold. Tonks grabbed his arm.

"Remus, love look at me. You need to calm down." She said softly, rubbing his arm. He closed his eyes tightly, fists clenched and took a deep ragged breath. Slowly he unclenched his fists and his eyes opened. They were still dark but he didn't look like he was ready to launch himself out of the seat and hunt Snape down.

"Are you absolutely sure Harry?" he forced out.

"Absolutely." The man stood up from the arm of the chair. He paced a tight line behind the chair, clearly trying to calm himself down. Every eye in the room followed him as he tried to control his temper. None of them had ever actually seen Remus lose his temper, he was always calm and collected but right now he looked ready to explode.

"And Dumbledore continues to let him work at Hogwarts?! He kept him in the Order?!" he ran a shaking hand through his silver streaked hair. He was clearly talking more to himself than to them. He turned back to them abruptly. "He is *not* going to get away with this." He hissed fiercely.

"Going after him won't solve anything." Tonks said just as fiercely, already knowing what he was thinking. Her silver eyes bored into his, the two locked into a silent argument. Remus was the first to break eye contact. He sighed heavily and dropped back onto the arm of the chair. Tonks slipped her hand through his, squeezing it. He gave her a grateful smile before turning back to Harry and the still silent Malfoy.

“Thank you for telling me Harry.” He said. Harry nodded, smiling wanly.

“It was your right to know.” He suddenly needed to leave, he needed to be with his family. He stood up.

“I have to get going.” He leaned forward and kissed Tonks on the cheek and shook Remus’s hand. “Congratulations again you guys.”

“Tell Hermione and Cattie we said hello.” Tonks said as he stepped over to the fireplace.

“I will.” He grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar on their mantel and threw it into the fire. After another nod to the small family he stepped into the flames. **“Potter Family Cottage!”**

He landed a bit steadier than usual, he didn’t even knock in the lamp. The sound of low voices and giggles drew him out of the room and into the hallway. He followed the sound into the family room where Hermione and Cattie sat. They were sitting across from one another at the dining table. Hermione was waving her wand over Cattie’s plate where a carrot stick was dancing across. Cattie was squinting hard at the plate, her own hand hovering over it and another carrot stick seemed to be trying to follow its comrade in the dance. She looked like she was concentrating hard on her spell but every couple of seconds a giggle would escape her mouth. He cleared his throat and both girls turned quickly towards the doorway.

“Daddy!” Cattie bounded from her chair and threw her arms around his waist. He scooped her into his arms and hugged her close. “You’re late.” She admonished him, wagging her finger.

“I’m sorry love, will you forgive me?” he gave her a exaggerated puppy-dog look. She tapped her chin, pretending to think hard.

“I forgive you.” She giggled.

“Thank you!” he kissed her soundly on the cheek and put her back on the floor. He walked over to the still sitting Hermione and leaned close.

"Do you forgive me?" he whispered. She smiled slowly and leaned forward, kissing him softly.

"Now I do." She whispered. Cattie made a disgusted noise and popped her fallen dancer into her mouth.

"Mommy said we could go swimming once you got home." She was already edging towards the door, obviously trying to rush them along. Harry turned and looked at Hermione. She smiled and shrugged.

"Go get your suit on." She told the little girl. She squealed and sprinted out of the room and up the stairs. Harry and Hermione followed behind slowly.

"So how did things go?" she asked him as they walked upstairs.

"As well as can be expected." He sighed. "Remus was pretty angry though but I expected him to be. I found out some good news though."

"What?" he grinned.

"Tonks and Remus are having a boy." She squealed loudly, not unlike Cattie had, and clapped her hands.

"Oh my gosh I'm so happy for them! But isn't it a bit too early to tell?" he shook his head and quickly told her the story of what had happened that morning. By now they had made it to their bedroom.

"I've never heard of that before. I'll have to look it up." Harry snorted and walked over to the wardrobe. He clearly remembered Brita throwing a pair of bathing shorts into his pile of clothes. He shouted triumphantly when he found them at the bottom on the wardrobe. He pulled the red and black shorts out and threw them onto the bed where Hermione scooped them up curiously.

"I thought you didn't know how to swim?" he shrugged, blushing.

"I learned when I was about six. Some neighbors of the Dursley's had a pool party for their kid one year and they invited Dudley and me. The Dursley's couldn't leave me behind without it being suspicious so

they ended up dragging me along. Anyway Dudley shoved me into the pool and” he shrugged. “it was either swim or drown.” Hermione muttered something that probably wasn’t very nice under her breath and shook her head. Every time Harry let one of his ‘childhood’ stories slip out she hated the Dursley’s more and more. He didn’t have one good memory from his childhood.

“If you know how to swim why didn’t you swim with Cattie and I?” he blushed brighter and looked away.

“You.” He could feel his face heat more when she raised a confused eyebrow. “It was just...I was trying to control myself around you and I knew seeing you in that...suit and being so close to you.” He shook his head again. He looked over at Hermione to see her grinning looking inordinately pleased.

“I make you all hot and bothered?” she asked slyly, walking slowly over to him.

“Always.” He answered, his voice low. She wrapped her arms around him and stood on her toes, slowly pressing her lips to him. He groaned slightly and pulled her closer. He could feel her grinning against his lips. They had just begun to deepen the kiss when there was a banging on the door.

“What’s taking you so long?!” Cattie shouted through the door. Groaning, Harry silently cursed his daughter’s always perfect timing. Hermione grudgingly detangled herself from his arms.

“We’re coming!” she shouted back. She gave the pouting Harry and kiss on the cheek and grabbed her own suit out of the closet. “Get dressed before she comes in here and dresses you herself.” She smiled at him and headed into the bathroom. Still grumbling Harry quickly undressed and pulled on his suit. Hermione stepped out of the bathroom just as he was pulling his t-shirt back on. She was tying the side of her bikini bottoms, Harry grinned when he saw her.

“Dressing up for me?” he teased. She rolled her eyes and smacked him on the arm.

“Cheeky.” She took a pair of shorts out of the wardrobe and pulled them on. Harry opened the door and Cattie sighed dramatically.

“Finally! I’ve been waiting *forever*.” She was trying to sound stern but the ruffled, polka dotted bathing suit kind of ruined it.

“Well we’re here now, let’s go.” Hermione said, grabbing her hand.

It was still raining when they made it into the conservatory but it definitely didn’t dampen Cattie’s spirits. She ran full tilt down the stairs and didn’t even pause before jumping into the pool.

“Cattie!” Hermione shouted, running after her. Harry laughed and sprinted after them. Hermione stopped at the edge of the water and peered into it, searching for the little girl. She surfaced at the far end of the pool.

“Come on!” she shouted to them. Harry grinned a slightly evil grin and bent over Hermione. She turned slowly and glared up at him.

“Harry don’t you dare even think about it.” He gave her his best innocent look.

“Think about what?” before she could scream he grabbed her by the arms and threw her into the water.

“Harry Potter!” she screamed once she surfaced. Cattie absolutely screamed with laughter. Laughing, he took off his shirt and jumped into the water. They spent hours in the pool. The few times Harry had been swimming, the birthday party when he was six and the second task, he had never had nearly as much fun.

They finally climbed out when the sun began to go down. They found big dark blue fluffy towels waiting for them when they got out of the pool. They didn’t think to use a drying spell, they just wrapped themselves in the towels and climbed the staircase.

“Can we swim again tomorrow?” Cattie asked eagerly after they wished Bronson and Caterina goodnight.

"I don't know, we'll see." Hermione answered. Harry sent her ahead to her room to get ready for bed while he and Hermione headed to their own room.

"When did she become such a ball of energy?" Hermione groaned, throwing herself on their bed. Harry closed their door and dropped down next to her, stretching.

"When wasn't she?" Hermione laughed and rolled over, scooting close to her and laying a head on his chest. Harry swallowed and shifted slightly. Neither one of them were dressed in more than their bathing suits which meant her skin, nearly every inch of it was pressed against his. He forced himself to stay completely still, he had no doubt that she could feel his heartbeat speeding up. She scooted up, her head leaving her chest and coming to rest near his. He turned his head and immediately their eyes locked. He shifted again, pulling her even closer and almost on its own accord his hand slowly traveled up her side. He could feel goosebumps rising on her warm skin and her breathing sped up. He wasn't sure which one of them leaned forward first but before he knew it their lips met. His tongue slipped into her mouth, her fingers tangled in his hair and her leg wrapped around his waist. Without thought he flipped them over, pressing her firmly into the mattress. His hands traveled down her sides and he gasped sharply when he felt Hermione's mouth leave his and bite his ear. He shot her a look and she giggled, grinning at him. His eyes narrowed. He was going to get her back for that. He trailed slow short kisses down her neck, stopping every once in a while to nip at her skin. He grinned when she gasped and arched against him.

"Cheeky." She gasped out as he moved to her shoulder. The strap of her suit fell down her shoulder as he continued to kiss her skin and he absentmindedly wondered if it was the bikini that drove him so crazy. She gasped again and gripped his shoulders. No, it was just her. His fingers were wrapping around the thin straps on her hips when a piercing scream tore through the house. Cattie's perfect timing strikes again.

He jumped off of Hermione and out of bed, Hermione following quickly behind, grabbing her wand of the bedside table. They sprinted

down the hallway and to her room where they could still hear her screaming.

“Cattie!” Harry screamed when her room came into sight. Smoke was billowing out of the door and they could hear the roar of fire.

“Daddy!” she shouted back. They entered the room and were struck by what they saw. The heavy curtains that covered Cattie’s huge windows were in flames, the little girl was backed against her bed staring at the fire with wide frightened eyes.

“What happened?!” Hermione screamed.

“I didn’t do it!” the little girl yelled. Harry ran into the room and scooped the little girl into his arms. Both Hermione and Harry turned to the flames, Harry lifted his hand and Hermione lifted her wand. At the same time two powerful jets of water flew at the fire engulfing the drapes and the fire was quickly extinguished.

“Cattie what happened?” Harry asked, setting the child on the floor and kneeling in front of her. Hermione knelt down next to them. Cattie looked away, suddenly looking very nervous.

“Err...oops?”

“Cattie.” He said firmly. She bit her lip and nudged a book on the floor under her bed.

“Well I...I was trying out a fire spell-”

“Catherine Elise Potter! I thought I told you that fire spells were too dangerous!” Hermione exclaimed angrily. Cattie looked away again, fiddling with her hands.

“I know but...Daddy-”

“Oh no young lady, your mum told you that they were too dangerous and you did it anyway.” She nodded, lips trembling.

“I’m sorry.”

"I know you are but you still have to be punished." Hermione glanced at Harry and he shrugged. They've never actually had to punish her before. Hermione took a deep breath and looked sternly at the little girl. "No more magic for a week." The little girl's mouth dropped open and her eyes widened.

"But-" she stammered.

"No buts. Your mum and I are standing by your punishment." She pressed her lips together and nodded against the sudden rush of tears. "Now we have to clean up this mess." And he was right, the room was a mess. What was once beautiful soft blue drapes were now charred pieces of fabric littered around the room. The smell of smoke still lingered and the walls were dripping wet. Harry sighed heavily and ran a hand through his still damp hair. It was going to be a looong night.

A/N: Yay!! I *finally* updated. I hope you enjoyed the latest chapter. I'm sorry it took so long but right after my computer got fixed I got the flu so I didn't get much of a chance to write. Also I apologize if anything sounds confusing, I was hopped up on cough syrup most of the time so I'm not quite sure how some things sound. Anywho thank you all so much for your patience and very supportive reviews, they mean a lot to me. I'll try to get the next chapter up soon and hopefully it'll be a bit more interesting. Thank you again for reading!

Chapter 26

The next week passed slowly. The Potter family was still coping with the aftermath of the Italy attack; the nightmares still hadn't disappeared, not for any of them but slowly but surely they were beginning to help each other heal.

Harry was sleeping deeply, dreaming about a certain brown haired woman when he felt a sharp poke in the back. He squeezed his eyes tightly and tried to bury himself deeper into his covers, pressing himself closer to Hermione. He heard a familiar giggle closer than before and he felt another sharp poke, this time in the side.

"Wake up Daddy." Cattie sing-songed. She giggled again when he groaned. "Come on." Silently cursing himself for not locking the door last night he forced his heavy eyes open and sat up.

"What is it Cattie?" he croaked. The sun was just beginning to rise and very little light had made its way into his and Hermione's bedroom. Hermione was still sound asleep; Harry glared at her sleeping form in envy. Cattie was sitting innocently at the end of the bed, grinning at her father.

"The week is over." She chirped happily. Harry looked at her blankly, in disbelief. She had been moping all week about her ban from magic, pestering them to the point of wanting to strangle her. He had been tempted to give in, just to get her to be quiet. Hermione seemed to be made of stone when it came to Cattie's begging, she never seemed to even be close to losing her temper or giving in, unlike Harry who as soon as the little girl pouted up at him with those big green eyes he wanted to give her anything she wanted.

"Cattie...did you wake me up just for that?" he grumbled. Catherine giggled and shook her head.

"No, I'm also hungry." He groaned and threw himself back onto the bed, drawing the covers over his head.

"You can go downstairs and DeeDi will give you breakfast." He muttered to her from under the blankets. Cattie made a whining noise and draped herself over her Daddy.

"But I want you to come and eat with me." She whined.

"Just go and eat with her." Hermione grumbled sleepily, nudging him with her feet. Not so silently cursing Harry threw off his blankets and stumbled out of bed. Cattie hopped off after him, grinning happily. She skipped over and grabbed his hand, absolutely beaming up at him. His anger quickly faded, a still tired smile tugging at his lips. He could never stay angry at her, she was his little angel and he completely adored her.

"So I can start doing magic now?" she asked eagerly as they left the bedroom, leaving Hermione to her sleep. Harry grinned down at her.

"Yep, you can." She grinned so wide he swore he thought her face was going to split in half.

"Great! Can you teach me water spells?" he shrugged.

"I don't see why not. Why do you want to know?" they were in the hallway now, walking into the family dining room. She shrugged herself.

"When you and Mommy err...put out the curtains it was really wicked." She shrugged. "I just want to know how to do it." He dropped into a chair, forcing down a yawn, and Catherine sat next to him. As usual full plates of food popped into existence in front of them. There was steaming eggs, sausages, and toast. The elves must have known exactly what kind of mood he was in because a hot cup of coffee had also appeared with his food. He rarely drank it but today, judging Catherine's already bubbling energy, he knew he'd need it.

"Will you teach me today?" Harry sighed and took another gulp of his steaming drink.

"Yes, I'll teach you. Eat your breakfast." Catherine frowned slightly at his less than enthusiastic answer but shrugged and dug into her food. They ate in relative silence, Cattie talking and Harry mostly just

grunting in return. It was nearly the end of breakfast before he started to wake up and he was able to really string together full sentences. They were just finishing up when Hermione shuffled into the dining room. Her wild curls were pulled into a messy ponytail and she, like the rest of her family, was still dressed in her pajamas. She looked half asleep but she was definitely more awake than Harry had been.

“Good morning.” She said, sitting down.

“Morning. Daddy’s going to teach me water spells today.”

“That’s great hun, just as long as you promise not to do any more spells when your dad and I aren’t around. Remember what happened last time?” The little girl sighed.

“Yes, and I won’t do it again. I promise.”

(Line here)

“Ok Cattie next time, don’t aim at me.” Harry called to the child on the other side of the room as he dried his soaking clothes for what seemed like the thousandth time in the past hour.

“Sorry.” She called back. They were standing on two different sides of the room. When Harry had begun teaching her the spell after breakfast they had started only standing a few feet away from one another but he had forgotten just how strong her spells were. The jet of water that had shot out of her hand had hit him so hard in the chest it had knocked him off his feet, soaking him from head to toe. He had learned his lesson and he stayed well out of bruising range. Unfortunately he couldn’t seem to get out of soaking range.

“Let’s try one more time and then we’ll quit for the day. Remember; don’t try to force the spell, let the magic flow naturally.” She nodded and repositioned herself, lifting her hand. Harry flicked his wrist and conjured up a cushion much like the others piled up in the corner of the dueling room and placed it directly between him and the child. With another flick of his wrist the cushion burst into flames. Cattie narrowed her eyes in concentration and flicked her own small wrist.

A strong jet of water shot out of her palm and at the burning cushion. The fire was extinguished with a hiss and what looked like a small wave hit Harry, once again soaking him from the waist down. He sighed heavily and shook his head, eyeing his dripping clothes.

"Oops." Cattie muttered, sounding defeated. "I can't do it." Harry quickly flicked his wrist and dried his jeans.

"Yes you can love, it'll just take a bit of practice." He reassured her, running a hand through her soft curls. She nodded slowly, still frowning. He quickly banished the ruined cushion and led Catherine out of the room.

"Learning a bit of magic, eh?" Caterina asked as they crossed the hallway.

"Yeah, a bit." Harry answered. They bid farewell to the portraits and headed downstairs. Cattie was still quiet as they walked, frowning and staring at the floor. Harry grabbed her hand and smiled down at her.

"You'll get it Cattie, don't worry. It's a pretty advanced spell and I can guarantee you, you're doing better at it than I did when I first learned it."

"Are you sure? I tried really hard but-"

"Harry!" Hermione's panicked voice interrupted her, shouting from downstairs. Harry's head snapped up and he sprinted down the staircase, Cattie running to catch up. They skidded into the family room where Hermione's voice had come from. She was kneeling in front of the fireplace, the head of Remus was floating in the bright green flames and in both their eyes Harry could see fear. Had something happened to Tonks?

"What happened?" he demanded, dropping down next to Hermione. Cattie squeezed in between her parents, wanting to know what was going on.

"There was an attack on Diagon Alley." Remus began. Harry closed his eyes briefly, fists clenching. Of all the things he had expected Remus to say that was not one of them.

"Cattie, go upstairs please." Hermione told the little girl. Cattie frowned and opened her mouth to protest.

"But-"

"Catherine." Hermione said firmly. The child's mouth snapped closed and she sullenly left the room.

"Did anyone...Did anyone survive?" Harry asked once Cattie had disappeared up the staircase, almost afraid of what the answer would be. He let out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding when Remus nodded grimly.

"Quite a few people made it out, it seems a few Hogwarts students had been there to buy some last minute school things and were able to get people to safety."

"The DA." Hermione said to Harry, smiling shakily. Her smile faded quickly.

"That's not all." Remus paused, seeming to have a hard time saying what was coming next. "The Weasley's were also there. They had gone to meet Bill and Fleur at the Leaky Cauldron." Harry froze. Numbness slowly began to spread over him. The Weasley's were his first real family, if something had happened to them...

"Are they ok?" his voice sounded all wrong even to his own ears. He distantly felt Hermione's hand slip into his.

"Molly is here at Grimmauld right now but...Right before they flooded to safety Ron noticed that Ginny wasn't with them. He ran off to go and find her. The others, all except Fred and George, had already left so they ran after him." Remus shook his head. "A few minutes ago the twins came back but...they couldn't find Ron or Ginny." The numbness disappeared and pain flared in his chest. He couldn't lose Ron, not when they had just started being friends again.

“What about everyone else?” Hermione asked, sounding choked.

“Arthur and the boys went back out to search for them but Molly and Fleur came here. Molly was a bit...hysterical so they brought her here; Tonks and Fleur are trying to calm her down.”

“We’re coming over.” Hermione said, her voice steadier. Harry nodded, he had been thinking the same thing. He had to go help find Ron. Remus smiled sadly at them and nodded.

“I figured you would.”

“We’ll see you in a few minutes.” He nodded again and his head disappeared from the flames.

“I’m going to go get Cattie.” Harry said swiftly, standing up. He turned to run up the stairs and get Cattie but Hermione jumped up and grabbed him and suddenly threw her arms around his neck.

“He’s going to be ok.” She whispered in his ear. He swallowed with difficulty and nodded.

“I know.” He said just as softly, hugging her back. After a quick squeeze Hermione released him and he left the room. Cattie was already sitting at the top of the stairs. She had obviously been trying to listen in on their conversation. He wasn’t sure how much she heard but from the look on her face it was enough. She jumped to her feet when she saw him.

“I already have my shoes on.” She said quickly, jogging down to meet him at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m ready to go.” Luckily she was already dressed for the day, jeans and a purple t-shirt, so they wouldn’t have to waste any time.

“Good. Thank you Cattie.” He scooped her up and walked quickly back to the family room where Hermione was still waiting.

“Ready?” Hermione asked when they stepped back into the room.

“Ready.” He handed Cattie to her and she grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar on their mantel. She threw it into the flames and Cattie assumed the ‘floo position’ as they had taken to calling it.

“12 Grimmauld Place!” they disappeared in a swirl of green flame. As soon as his family had flooed he grabbed his own handful of floo powder and flooed after them.

Surprisingly he didn’t land face first like usual. Maybe he was finally starting to get used to flooing. Remus was waiting for him, he was the only ones in the room.

“Where’s everyone?” he asked them, dusting ash from his dark blue shirt.

“They’re in the kitchen.” Remus answered him, pulling him into a hug. He hugged the older man back. Once he released him he led Harry into the kitchen where everyone else was. They were all sitting at the kitchen island. Mrs. Weasley was hunched over a cold looking cup of tea, tears streaming down her flushed face, and shuddering tear filled breaths shaking her form. Fleur was sitting next to her, as flawlessly beautiful as usual, with an arm wrapped around her shaking shoulders. Her own eyes were red-rimmed and her lips trembled. Hermione was sitting across from her with Cattie on her lap holding one of the older woman’s hands, Tonks was holding the other. Tonks was sitting next to Hermione with her with her hand over Mrs. Weasley’s.

“They’re going to find them Molly, it’ll be alright.” She was saying. Harry’s eyebrows shot up when he saw who else was in the room and what he was doing. Malfoy was serving the assembled women tea, an obviously unhappy look on his face. He flicked his wand and Mrs. Weasley’s tea began to steam. With that done he looked over at Tonks who nodded and he left the room.

“I know I just...There could still be death eaters there or...I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to any of them.” She sobbed. Harry was forcefully reminded of her boggart and he swallowed thickly, his heart clenching painfully.

"It's going to be ok Mrs. Weasley." He said, laying a hand on her shoulder. The woman looked up at him and smiled shakily.

"Thank you dear." She sobbed. Harry squeezed her shoulder.

"I'm going to head over to Diagon Alley to help." Mrs. Weasley turned quickly and grabbed his hand, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Just...just be careful, ok?" her grip on his hand was near bruising.

"I will. I promise." She stared into his eyes as if trying to determine if he was completely earnest, when she was satisfied with what she saw she slowly released his hand. Hermione put down Cattie and stood up.

"I'm coming too." She said firmly. Harry didn't bother to object, to tell her it might be too dangerous. She had just as much right to help find Ron as he did, he was her best friend too.

"You two be careful." Tonks said, helping Cattie onto the stool Hermione had vacated.

"Aren't I always?" He grinned

"Nope!" Catherine said. He mock scowled at her and dropped a kiss on her forehead.

"We'll be back, be good sweetheart."

"Good luck!" Fleur called to them as they left the room.

They left the kitchen and walked back over to the fireplace. Hermione squeezed his hand once before grabbing a handful of floo powder and throwing it into the fire.

"The Leaky Cauldron!" she was gone in an instant. Harry took a deep breath and threw his own handful into the flames.

"The Leaky Cauldron!" he nearly fell over Hermione when he stumbled out of the fireplace. She was standing directly in front of it, her eyes glued to the room around them.

“Hermione what’s...” his voice trailed off as he took in the destruction around them. Chairs were strewn all around the room, some splinted and broken. The counter where Tom usually stood behind was completely blown to pieces and glass was everywhere. Scorch marks were on the walls and under a cracked table a pool of what looked like blood. The door leading to the alley was now nothing more than a large, gapping hole.

“My god.” Hermione whispered.

“And this isn’t the worst.” A voice said. They both whirled around, Hermione’s wand and Harry’s hand raised and ready.

“Whoa!” Bill exclaimed, raising his hands in front of him. They instantly dropped out of their defensive positions.

“Bill!” Hermione exclaimed. “Have you found Ron and Ginny yet?” Bill pressed his lips into a grim line and shook his head. He looked worn, haggard. His usual pristine robes were streaked with dust, his flame colored hair was mussed and his bangs hung in his red rimmed eyes. Guilt almost radiated off of him

“No, we haven’t seen a sign of them. I was just going to check in on Mum and Fleur, see how they’re holding up.”

Harry nodded. “Alright, do you know where we can find everyone else?”

“Well the last time I saw the twins they were over by the Owl Emporium. Dad should still be around Flourish & Blott’s. Watch your step while you’re out there...the death eaters sure did a number on this place and its absolutely crawling with Aurors.”

“Don’t worry we will.” Hermione assured him.

He stepped closer to them and placed a hand on each of their shoulders, squeezing them.

“We’ll find Ron and Ginny.” He said firmly before releasing them and heading over to the huge fireplace they had just stepped over. As he

watched the older man leave Harry wondered if he had been reassuring them, or himself.

Once Bill had flooed back to Grimmauld they crossed over the debris littered floor and climbed through the giant hole in the wall. Surprisingly the chilly little courtyard that held the entrance to Diagon Alley looked relatively unchanged. Except for a few bricks and pieces of wood strewn around from the Leaky Cauldron's wall it looked fine. Tensing, Harry forced himself to cross the silent courtyard with Hermione. She stepped close to the wall and carefully tapped the bricks with her wand. In no time the bricks pulled back to reveal what was left of Diagon Alley.

The damage in the Leaky Cauldron was nothing compared to the destruction that lay before them. Buildings and shops that had once stood tall over the sidewalk were now nothing more than crumbled pieces of wood and stone. Most of the cobbled sidewalks were splintered and cracked.

They could see Aurors putting out still smoldering fires around the alley. More Aurors were standing over the wreckages of the buildings with their wands out, slowly waving them over the debris. Hermione swallowed, knowing that they were more than likely looking for survivors or...the bodies of those who weren't so lucky. The bright, warm sun filling the alley seemed to almost be mocking the devastation below.

More witches and wizards walked through the rubble, people in bright white and red trimmed robes were obviously MediWitches and Wizards, others being treated by them, and others calling and searching for their loved ones. Harry watched it all with blank eyes. It didn't feel like it was real, it was like he was trapped in some surreal dream where nothing was making any sense. He had always felt a connection to this place, the first place he had ever saw the magic of the magical world and now...now it was reduced to near nothing but rubble.

"Come on, lets go find Ron." He was surprised at how steady Hermione's voice sounded, like this was something they saw everyday. Only the bruising grip she had on his arm gave away her

shock, her horror. His mouth couldn't seem to form any words so Harry just nodded and together they slowly tried to pick their way through the destroyed alley.

They didn't see any of the Weasley's for a while and Harry was beginning to think they had already found Ron and Ginny and had gone. They finally spotted the flash of bright red hair that usually identified a Weasley a bit away from them.

"Harry! Hermione!" it was Fred and George. They jogged over to them, hopping over a fallen post.

"Fred! George! We've been looking everywhere for you guys." Harry said once the older boys had gotten closer. One of the twins, he still couldn't tell them apart, shrugged and pushed a strand of bright hair behind his ear.

"We didn't know you were coming. I guess you heard about Ron and Ginny?" They nodded grimly. The twins looked much older than Harry had ever seen them. The typical spark of mischief in their eyes was gone, replaced by only worry and fear. Their faces looked hard, without even a sign of their usual bright smiles.

"What happened?" Hermione asked them softly.

One of the twins sighed and shook his head, looking away from them.

"This morning Mum woke us early. We were coming down to Diagon to meet Bill and Fleur, they said they had something big they wanted to talk with the family about. We were all pretty sure they were going to tell us they were getting engaged, it was only a matter of time." He suddenly chuckled, no humor in it at all. "Fred and I were even going to set off a few fireworks when they broke the 'news'. We were all sitting in Fortescue's when it happened." The other twin, now revealed as George took over.

"Bill and Fleur were just getting ready to tell us when the screaming started. People were running down the streets, away from something we couldn't see. Dad had jumped from the table and grabbed a man who was running close to our table, he asked him what was going on and he just said 'death eaters'. I don't think I've ever seen our Dad so

scared before. He told us to run to the Cauldron, to floo back home and we had almost made it there when things started to really get bad. Death eaters came from everywhere, covering the streets. They had us all cornered. We tried to fight through them so we could get to the cauldron but there was just too many of them. I think we even saw Malfoy.” Harry flinched. He had let the man go and look what had happened. George didn’t take any notice of his reaction, he continued on with the story, eyes distant. “We thought we were done for when...” he swallowed hard. “One of the death eaters hit Bill with a Cruciatus and Fleur was furious! She went into total Veela-Bird mode. She blew a hole right through ‘em. We were able to get away then but there was no way we were getting to the Cauldron, there was still too many of them. We ran into Madam Malkin’s and nearly got our asses blown off by Neville Longbottom. I tell you nearly half the DA and their families were holed up in the shop, wands at the ready. Luna, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Cho, even Smith.” Fred nodded and continued the story.

“We were able to hide out in there for a while.” He ran a hand over his face. “It was horrible. We could hear people screaming right outside, hear the buildings exploding and falling and there was nothing we could do to help anyone, we just sat there and listened. It was driving me crazy, I was ready to run out of that shop and kick some death eater ass. All I could think about was getting out of there and I know I wasn’t the only one. Turns out the choice was taken from us. There was this huge crash and it was like the entire side wall of the shop collapsed. The death eaters had blown through it and they were coming in. We defended it as best as we could, we took quite a few of the bastards down too. Anyway we soon had to get out, they were boxing us in. We ran out into the alley, all of us and tried to get to the Cauldron. The attack must’ve been dwindling down because there wasn’t as many death eaters there when we left the shop and with the DA we were able to make it to the Cauldron. We were even able to get some people out with us. But...” he looked down, guilt and tears brimming in his eyes.

“We didn’t even notice Ginny wasn’t with us. What kind of big brothers are we that we didn’t even notice our sister was gone?” he wiped his eyes quickly and plowed on. “Nearly everyone had flooed out, it was just us and Ron when he realized Ginny hadn’t flooed

away and she wasn't with us. He ran out of the pub. We called after him but he didn't even turn around so we ran after him." He shook his head again. "I don't know how we lost him but all of a sudden he was just...gone. We searched and searched everywhere we could but there we still death eaters around. We couldn't find him. The Aurors *finally* showed up and the death eaters somehow got out before most of them could get caught. After the death eaters were gone we kept looking for Ron and Ginny but we couldn't find them...we floored over to the Burrow and told mum and dad."

"Did-did the Order show up? At all?" Harry asked with difficulty, after a short silence. Both of the twins snorted.

"They showed up all right." George said. "They stunned a few death eaters, held some off but they still got away. I thought at least Dumbledore would have *done* something! He could've wiped them all out if he wanted to but all he did was stun them."

"These...*people* were killing and torturing left and right and he did practically nothing." Fred scoffed.

"Are you guys alright?" Hermione asked. The anger faded from both the boy's faces and they smiled wanly at the girl.

"We're fine Hermione; I just wish we could know if Ron and Ginny are okay." George answered.

"Then we need to go and find them." Harry finally spoke. The twins straightened up and nodded, Fred smiled grimly.

"You're right, we're wasting time."

"We'll split up. I can search over by Flourish & Blott's," George said.

"And I can go back over by Zonko's." Fred said.

"We can shoot up red sparks if we see any sign of them." Hermione suggested. They all agreed and Harry and Hermione bid farewell to Fred and George. The twins jogged off in opposite directions. Harry turned to Hermione with an eyebrow raised.

"I guess I can go that way." He said, jerking his head in the opposite direction.

"And I'll go the other way." She leaned forward and placed a kiss on his cheek. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close, kissing her temple.

"Be careful." He said softly in her ear.

"I will, as long as you are."

He slowly released her. He watched her pick her way slowly through the rubble until he couldn't see her anymore. He sighed heavily, staring at the devastation around him vacantly. It didn't make sense. This wasn't...this wasn't supposed to happen. He had thought with the destruction of the few horcruxes they had found that maybe Voldemort would begin to lose some of his power but it just seemed like he was gaining more, his grip on the magical world seemed to be tightening and he knew it was only a matter of time before even more lives were destroyed.

He sighed again and started forward. He inched his way through the silent alley, walking slowly and hoping to see some kind of sign of Ron or Ginny. It was shocking; seeing the places he had walked by and shopped in destroyed, empty and broken. The chairs and tables in front of Fortescue's were thrown around and quite a few were broken, the windows were blown out and he could see scorch marks on various places around the building. Though compared to other buildings the ice cream shop was still pretty lucky. Other shops were half destroyed with roofs caving in, and others...others were completely obliterated.

He stopped his slow walk in front of a pile of rubble where a ragged man was sitting on the dusty ground, head bowed over his legs. Harry swallowed hard. He knew where he was. He stepped closer to the stooped man, his shoes crunching on broken pieces of wood and glass. He nearly tripped over a downed wooden sign. **Tristan & Family Custom Trunks.**

"Tristan?" He asked softly. The man's head snapped up, haunted hazel eyes flying to him.

“Hey.” He croaked, pushing dirt streaked white hair from his face. Harry stepped closer and knelt in front of the slumped man.

“Are you...are you alright?” he asked lamely, not quite knowing what to say. The older man seemed to think it was as a ridiculous question as Harry did because he snorted and looked away, picking up a piece of broken wood.

“Alright? Do you know this store was in my family for over a hundred years and now...” he laughed once, the pained sound of it nearly causing Harry to flinch. “It’s gone. Years and years of work and nothing to show for it.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“You can kill me before the rest of my family does.” He laughed again and looked back at Harry, smiling a shaky smile. “I’m sorry you won’t be getting your trunk mate.” Harry returned his smile.

“Damn, I was just coming to pick it up.” Tristan chuckled, this laugh not quite as pained as the others. His laughter faded as quickly as it had come and he sighed again. He looked around again at the wreckage that was once his beloved shop and slowly forced himself to his feet.

“I guess I better get home...tell my family what happened.” He sighed.

Harry stood up also.

“If there’s anything you need...” he said. Tristan placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it.

“Thanks Harry, I guess I’ll see you around. He waved and turned around, walking back towards the Leaky Cauldron. Harry returned his wave before slowly continuing his search for the two missing Weasley’s.

He searched for hours, climbing over and around piles of debris, running into more devastated shop owners and family members. His heart had nearly stopped when he stumbled across a group of Aurors digging out the broken body of a red haired woman out of a pile of

rubble, thinking that they were pulling out Ginny. Another woman, standing at the bottom of the pile screamed and her hands flew to her face, falling to her knees. Her heart-wrenching sobs reverberated through him, shaking him more than anything else he'd seen in the destroyed alley. He walked past the heartbroken woman and continued looking for Ron.

The sun had started to set by the time he made it to Madam Malkin's and he was slowly beginning to lose hope that they would find them. He wiped the sweat from his face and stared at the destroyed building in front of him.

"Damn." Was all he could say. The robe shop was completely destroyed. The entire building had collapsed, not one piece of it was left standing. Dust was still rising from the remains of the shop. Silence surrounded him, not a soul was around. Just like he had done on the other destroyed building he carefully climbed on top of the rubble and tattered robes, coughing to clear the dust that suddenly coated his throat.

"Ron?" he called, cupping his hands in front of his mouth. "Ginny?"

His own voice echoed back to him. He coughed and tried again.

"Ron! Ginny!" silence was his only response. He opened his mouth to try again when a small noise stopped him. His heart sped up and he strained his ears. He heard the noise again and he dropped down to his knees, crawling towards the sound.

"Ron?" he called softly.

"H-Harry?" a low voice croaked from beneath the rubble. Harry dropped down to his stomach, sharp pieces of wood poking into his abdomen and squinted his eyes, trying to see between the piles of debris.

"Ron, is that you?" he asked frantically. There was a sound of someone coughing fiercely, the sound he had heard.

"Yeah." Ron croaked. Harry flicked his wrist and bright red sparks shot into the air.

“Hey mate, are you ok? Is Ginny with you?” he flicked his wrist again and a small ball of light appeared in his hand. He lowered his hand towards the rubble to try and see Ron. A pale blue eye and dusty red hair came into view.

“I’m ok but Ginny...she’s right here with me but she’s unconscious. I can’t get her to wake up.” His voice broke at the end and Harry’s heart clenched. He and Ginny had their share of...problems but he didn’t want anything to happen to her. He thought about digging them out himself but quickly dismissed the idea when he saw exactly how they were trapped. A hefty piece of the roof seemed to have caved in on top of them. A large part of it was pinning Ron under the rubble that half buried him.

“Ok mate, we’re going to get you guys out of there.” He reassured him. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

Ron chuckled darkly, coughing.

“I hate to say it mate but it isn’t looking too good.” His voice was so low Harry was straining to hear him. He couldn’t lose Ron now, not when they were just starting to be friends again.

“Harry!” a shout sounded behind him. Harry turned around quickly to see Hermione, the twins, and Mr. Weasley were running as best they could through the broken street towards the pile of rubble Harry was lying on top of.

“Did you find them?” Mr. Weasley asked frantically as the small group scrambled up next to Harry.

“They’re right here. Ginny’s unconscious.” The three Weasley’s paled dramatically and Hermione bit her lip hard. The elder Weasley dropped to his stomach and peered into the small hole where Ron’s face was just visible.

“Are you two alright son?” he asked, surprisingly calm.

“Just dandy Dad.” Ron answered and immediately started coughing again.

"We're going to get you both out of there, ok?" Arthur continued softly once Ron had stopped coughing. Ron was only able to grunt in response. Even through the rubble they could hear his rasping breathing.

"Fred." Mr. Weasley said sharply. The redhead's worried eyes snapped away from Ron to his father.

"I need you to run and find the Aurors. Tell them we found two more survivors."

He had obviously come to the same conclusion that Harry had. There was no way they would be able to get Ron and Ginny out by themselves.

"But we could do it without-"

"No we can't. Go as fast as you can." Fred pressed his lips together tightly but he nodded and scuttled down the pile of debris. As soon as his feet hit the ground he was off and running. He sprinted down the street, jumping over the fallen debris. Harry had never seen him run that fast, not even from Filch.

"Does anything hurt?" Hermione asked Ron, kneeling next to the small opening.

"I can't-I can't really feel anything." He sounded confused and not a little panicked. "Why can't I feel anything?!" his breath was starting to come in sharp gasps and the eyes they could see were wide and frightened.

"Ron, you need to calm down." She said soothingly. "Ron, look at me." Ron's visible blue eye locked on to hers.

"Take a deep breath ok? Calm down." Ron took a deep breath, his breathing slowing.

"How's Ginny?" George asked, once Ron had calmed down. The other boy's head disappeared from their view for a second then returned.

“She’s still out of it.” He said, voice wavering. “Is Fred back yet?”

Harry sat up and looked over his shoulder to see if the twin was coming back. At first he didn’t see him, the light from the sinking sun directly in his eyes. He shaded his hand over his eyes and squinted through the bright light for Fred. Finally he saw him. He was running full speed back to where they were and behind him Harry could see two people in black robes and two in white, trying to keep up with the redhead’s long legs. Fred scrambled up the pile with the three Aurors, the MediWizard and MediWitch stayed at the bottom. One Auror, a man with corn colored hair, looked oddly familiar to Harry.

“Mr. Potter, nice to see you again.” The man sneered when they had all made it to the top. Harry instantly knew where he knew the man from and he forced down his own urge to sneer.

“We never seem to meet in good circumstances do we Mr. Westin.” Harry answered him. Without even looking at her he could sense Hermione’s glare burning into the Auror. The man opened his mouth to say something else but one of the women pushed him aside.

“How many are there?” she asked, her tone clipped and professional. She had icy blue eyes and she looked down at the bedraggled group without any emotion. Her silver colored hair was coiled tightly around her head in a thick braid.

“Two. My son and daughter.” Mr. Weasley answered her immediately, obviously not taking any offense in her tone. Fred and George noticed though and they both glared at her. Their siblings were trapped under a pile of stone and wood, more than likely seriously hurt and this woman was treating it like business as usual. Another woman, the MediWitch, frowned at the Aurors before climbing up the pile and kneeling down next to Hermione. She looked down at the wide-eyed Ron and smiled warmly.

“We’ll have you and your sister out of there in a second; everything’s going to be ok.” She said soothingly. Ron swallowed hard and nodded jerkily.

“Ok.” He croaked. The woman gave him another warm smile before standing back up.

"We're going to need you folks to get off of the pile, so we can get them out." Westin said, waving his hand in the direction of the ground. George opened his mouth, probably to tell Westin exactly where he could shove his orders when Mr. Weasley shot him a look. He snapped his mouth shut but rolled his eyes and started for the ground. The rest of the group climbed down from the wreckage and onto the debris littered ground. The kind witch carefully made her way back down with them then went back to stand next to her comrade.

Hermione was practically chewing a hole through her lip, her eyes brimming with worry. Harry slipped his hand through hers, lending her support they both needed. The Aurors backed away from the spot over Ron until they were near the edge of the pile, their backs to the anxious people below. They all raised their wands and pointed them at the place where Ron and Ginny were buried. With a shout of the incantation a steady stream of yellow light shot out of their wands and hit the debris. Slowly the larger pieces rolled away from the area, leaving only the small pieces of wood and glass and the huge piece of wood that was pinning Ron under. Now that the other pieces were gone they could finally see Ginny. She was unconscious, Ron's arms wrapped tightly around her and his body half hunched over hers protectively. The piece pinning Ron was half covering his stomach and legs, only the bottom of his shoes visible. None of it was touching Ginny but from the bleeding gash on her head something must have fallen and knocked her unconscious.

"Ok young man, we're going to try and move this off of you. Don't move a muscle." The stern woman said.

"I wasn't planning on it." Ron groaned.

The Aurors once again raised their wands, taking different positions around the youngest Weasley's. They shouted the incantation again and the piece began to slowly rise from on top of Ron. He called out once before his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out. Hermione sobbed once and her grip on Harry's hand tightened at their friend's obvious pain and at what was now revealed.

Ron's clothes, from waist to knee, were covered in blood. His hands were covered in shallow cuts and one of his ankles was twisted in the

wrong direction. Ginny had gotten off much better. Small scratches crossed her pale face the gash on her head was still bleeding, blood dripping down her face and onto the pieces of wood below her. As soon as Ron and Ginny were free the other three Weasley's and Harry and Hermione climbed up the pile as fast as they could. Mr. Weasley dropped down next to his children, his hands reached out as if to lift Ginny's head but the MediWizard grabbed his shoulder. They had scrambled up after the group.

"Wait sir, we don't want to move them." The man said firmly but not unkindly. He had a rather pointed face, full of sharp angles and contours and black, gray speckled hair. His eyes were dark and intense but still warm and kind. Mr. Weasley carefully ran his hands through Ginny's hair and squeezed Ron's shoulder.

"Alright Ron, I'm going to be right here, ok?" he said softly. Ron nodded with difficulty, his eyes were moist. His father stood up and took a few steps back. The MediWizards stepped closer to the teens and lifted their wands.

"Petrificus Totalus!" The body binds hit the two teens, stopping any movement they could possibly make. The woman reached into the pocket of her robes and pulled out a thick gold chain with a large medallion emblazoned with the picture of a potion bottle crossed with a wand.

"This is a portkey." She said, turning to the family. "It'll take me and the kids to St. Mungo's. Bernard here has another; he'll take you guys there after us. You can meet us there." Mr. Weasley ran an agitated hand through his thinning hair and shook his head.

"No. I need to come with you now." He said firmly. The woman looked at him thoughtfully for a second before sighing and nodding.

"Grab on." She said, handing him a part of the chain. She leaned over so the chain was also touching Ron and Ginny.

Mr. Weasley looked up at the other three teens.

“Floo call your mother when you get there. I’ll see you guys in a little bit.” The woman tapped the medallion with her wand and in a flash they were gone.

“Ok, let’s get going.” Bernard said and pulled out his own medallion.

“I hope we meet on better terms next time Mr. Potter.” Westin sneered as the twins, Harry and Hermione stepped over to grab the chain.

“I hope we never meet again.” Harry answered. Bernard tapped the medallion with his wand and Harry instantly felt the familiar tug behind his navel.

The shock of his feet hitting solid ground was almost jarring. Before he even had a chance to take in his surroundings he was nearly bowled over by a wizard running full speed around them.

People were rushing around everywhere in the vast hallway where they had landed. Medi witches and wizards in waist-length white robes were shouting orders at one another, people were rushing in and out with people on stretchers, and there were injured people in blood stained clothes waiting in long lines in front of a giant white oval desk. A very flustered witch was manning the desk, trying hard to listen to all the people who were shouting at her. She looked near tears. Directly behind her was what looked like a floating white disk. On the disk were small round lights with names of various people next to them; most of them were glowing a soft yellow light but every once in a while one would flash green or pink and a MediWizard would scurry down the hall. Just as he was looking at the board one began to flash red rapidly and an alarm sounded loudly, at least six of the white robed people ran down the hallway directly behind them.

The walls of the vast room were painted a bright white at least two of the walls were lined with high windows. The ceiling wasn’t enchanted like that of Hogwarts but instead a circular dome of glass which sent rainbow colored slats of light dancing down to the white marble below.

“Where’s the fireplaces?” George asked Bernard. The MediWizard pointed towards a wall at the far end of the room that was completely

lined with large white stone fireplaces. George nodded and jogged away from the group.

“Tell me when you find Ginny and Ron!” he shouted over his shoulder as he darted through the crowd.

“You can ask Elizabeth over there where to find your family.” Bernard said, gesturing to the teeming desk. “I need to get back to Diagon Alley.”

“Thank you for your help.” Fred said. The man nodded once before tapping the chain with his wand. He disappeared instantly.

Harry slipped an arm around Hermione’s waist and the couple followed Fred through the packed crowd. They picked their way to the end of the ‘line’ and settled in for what was more than likely going to be a long, anxious wait. It felt like hours they were standing there but it had only been a few minutes. Fred fidgeted, bouncing on his heels. Harry knew he should say something to him but...he didn’t know what he could say to make him feel any better.

Hermione spent most of the time with her brow furrowed, worrying her lip and Harry soon felt like joining in and shouting of the rest of the distraught people around them. He was just about to give in to his mounting frustration when George returned, the rest of the family with him.

“Where are they?! Are they ok?!” Mrs. Weasley exclaimed frantically as she, Fleur, and Bill, along with Remus, ran over to them. She pulled Fred into his arms and squeezed him quickly.

“We don’t yet.” Fred said through clenched teeth, running an agitated hand through his fire colored hair. “They haven’t told us anything.”

Mrs. Weasley whimpered and she quickly wiped away the tears that had started to trickle down her face. She looked ragged. Her robes looked like they had been thrown on haphazardly; tendrils of red hair were falling into her tear streaked face and her hands were shaking terribly. Fleur, her eyes surprisingly puffy, could see the Weasley’s matron mounting panic and fear. She reached over and wrapped her thin arms around her.

"It iz going to be okay Mrz. Weasley." She said softly. Mrs. Wealsey offered her an unsteady smile and patted her arm.

"It's Molly, dear."

Bill wrapped an arm around each woman, pulling them close. "They'll be alright."

Remus sidled up next to Harry and Hermione and leaned close. "How are you to holding up?" he asked softly.

"As best as can be expected." Hermione murmured back, offering the older man a wavering smile.

"How's Cattie?" Harry asked him, turning towards the man.

"She a little antsy but she's fine. She's at home with Tonks and Draco." Harry nodded, frowning and looked away. He had no doubt that Cattie was fine with Tonks but Malfoy...he was a completely different story.

There was an anguished cry from behind them and they all whipped around. A MediWizard was standing in front of a young couple; the shout had come from the woman. She sobbed loudly and collapsed into her husbands arms, tears were streaming down his face. They sunk to the bright white floor, the man cradling his wife against his chest and burying his wet face in her hair. Clutched in the woman's hands was a blood streaked blue bear. They had lost their child.

The healer opened his mouth to say something but couldn't seem to come up with any words. His mouth formed a heartfelt apology and with a heavy sigh the man left the broken couple. Harry tore his eyes away from them with a hard swallow. The others turned away, faces whiter than before.

Seeing Molly's stricken expression Remus reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It's going to be ok." He murmured.

Harry glared down at the floor. He was definitely starting to hate those words.

Nearly ten minutes later the line still hadn't dwindled down and they were all getting worked up. Fred had quickly returned to his fidgeting, muttering dark things under his breath, his worry and frustration slowly stating to get the better of him. Bill stood with the weepy eyed Fleur close to his side, looking around the room with faraway eyes. Harry stared fixedly at the floor, his thoughts miles away. All he could see was Ron and Ginny lying under the pile of rubble, all he could think about was all the things he and Ron still hadn't talked about...he couldn't lose him now. Hermione looked to be by far the calmest of all of them. Very little emotion showed on her face as she stared straight ahead; Harry would've assumed she wasn't even thinking about where they were if it wasn't for the fact that every once in a while her grip on his hand would tighten and she'd shudder against him. Every time she'd do this he'd pull her a bit close, rubbing his thumb in small circles on her hands. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could take.

"I can't wait anymore!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed from behind them. Before they could even register what she was doing the woman elbowed past the people in front of them and straight up to the desk and the flustered woman, face a mask of determination. The people she had forcefully moved shouted protests at her but she ignored them, she needed to know where her children were. The group exchanged a glance and pushed their way after her.

"My name is Molly Weasley." She began firmly. "I'm looking for my children, Ron and Ginny Weasley."

The receptionist swiped dark blonde hair out of her flushed face and sighed mightily, clearly frustrated.

"I'm sorry ma'am but you need to get back in-"

"I need to know where they are. *Now.*" Mrs. Weasley interrupted her, fixing the stressed out woman with the glare that always sent her children running. She looked so worn out and overwhelmed, if it wasn't for the situation they were in Harry would have probably felt a bit more sympathy for her.

“Ma’m, I’m sorry about your children but there are hundreds of other people here in the same situation and you’ll just have to wait your turn.” Just as the words left her mouth another one of the small lights began flashing red and the alarm blared again. A gaggle of healers ran down another corridor.

Mrs. Weasley didn’t even flinch at the alarm; her eyes didn’t leave the younger woman’s. “Now you listen here-”

“Are you Molly Weasley?” a deep, accented voice asked from behind them. The little group turned quickly and the receptionists face collapsed with relief, well until she was once again engulfed in the shouts from the other people in line.

An extremely tall man stood before them. He looked to be the size of a small mountain, Harry had to tilt his head to see his face. He was rather forcefully reminded of Hagrid, though the man looked to be a few feet shorter than the half-giant. He was deeply tanned and rather impressive muscles strained against the arms of his thigh-length white MediWizard’s robes, his hands were bigger than Harry’s head. He had a mop of thick black curls on top his head, eyes the color of earth sat deep in his round face, a long slightly hooked nose stood proudly from his face, and short curly facial hair surrounded his large wide mouth. He looked like the type of person that always had a smile on his sun freckled face and if it wasn’t for the death and destruction of the day Harry had no doubt he would’ve been grinning at them.

His large hands were clasped behind his back and his head was tilted down at them, his smile crinkled eyes looking down at them with warmth and sympathy.

“Ye-yes.” Mrs. Weasley stammered, looking up at the man with wide eyes. He smiled kindly.

“Hello, I’m MediWizard Cosmas. I’m treating Ron and Ginny.” They all stood up straighter, instantly alert. Mrs. Weasley gasped slightly and grabbed the man’s arm before she caught herself, she quickly let him go.

“Are they ok? Where are they? My husband?” she asked frantically. He placed a large hand on her shoulder.

“They’re going to be fine.” He looked away from the woman to the people crowded around her and smiled. “We can all go see them now.”

Cosmas turned and they quickly followed him away from the crowded desk and down a corridor, jogging to keep up with his ridiculously long strides. The corridor was painted a soft blue with white marble floors, golden white orbs of light floated near the ceiling. The walls were lined with doors; each door held its own light with a name scrawled next to it, all were glowing a soft yellow. Harry looked at each, searching for either Ron or Ginny’s name.

The hallway was long and they passed several doors before turning a sharp corner.

“You know, I have a twin brother.” Cosmas said conversationally as he peered down at Fred and George.

“Let me guess, his name is Damian?” Hermione said, lips twitching slightly. The big man looked over his shoulder at her and grinned.

“Yes, as you can guess my mother knew exactly what she wanted us to do.” He chuckled.

“So he’s a healer too?” Hermione grinned in return.

“Of course.”

Harry looked at his fiancé in confusion, an eyebrow raised. She only smiled and shook her head.

“How are Ron and Ginny?” Bill asked the MediWizard as they continued down the surprisingly deserted hallway. Cosmas’s smile dimmed slightly.

“They’re pretty good. Ginny suffered a rather nasty bump to the head and a few shallow cuts and scratches, she should be fine in a couple of hours. As for Ron he suffered a broken ankle, a mild concussion,

and a pretty deep wound on his abdomen.” He glanced at Mrs. Weasley when she sobbed, hands flying to her mouth, before plowing on. “We were able to close the wound and stop the bleeding and a quick potion got rid of the concussion. He has a few bruises and cuts we were able to heal but they’ll be sore for a while, along with his stomach.” The large man shook his head. “I’m surprised that after that blow to the head he was able to stay awake for so long.”

“Ron’s always had a pretty hard head.” George said, drawing weak chuckles from everyone. Cosmas nodded, smiling. They continued down the hall a bit more before they came to a stop in front of a door. Its light was glowing the soft yellow and the name **Weasley** was written neatly next to it.

“Here we are.” The healer said. Before he could reach and open the door Mrs. Weasley pushed him aside and turned the knob, the door swung open easily.

“Oh! My babies!” the Weasley matron exclaimed before running to the room and to the nearest bed. Ginny fell into her mother’s arms, tears spilling down her face. Mr. Weasley stood up from the chair he had placed between the two beds. On the other bed lay Ron. His longish red hair was splayed across the crisp white pillow under his head and he was turned on his side. He turned his head when they walked inside.

“Mum?” he croaked, his overly bright eyes searching for her. She pulled away from her youngest and crossed over to his bed. Seeing the edge of the bandages wrapped around his abdomen she carefully wrapped her arms around her son, covering his pale face with kisses.

“You’re ok, you’re ok.” She murmured into his hair, rocking him gently. Fred and George nearly ran over to Ginny’s bed and gathered their little sister into their arms. She sobbed into their shoulders. Bill didn’t even hesitate, he stepped over to his family, Fleur with him, and hugged both his siblings.

Harry and Hermione stood awkwardly by the door. Harry wanted nothing more than to run over to Ron and throw his arms around him, make sure he was really alright but...a part of him knew that the Weasley’s considered both him and Hermione apart of their family

and he them but he still felt like he was intruding, like this was something only *family* should see. He glanced over at Hermione and from the tense way she was standing he knew she was thinking the same thing he was.

It was awhile before Ron was completely released and he spotted his best friends standing awkwardly by the door, Cosmas had left a long while ago. The room fell silent as their eyes met. Ron slowly let a smile creep onto his face. Hermione suddenly burst into tears and ran over to the bed, gently wrapping her arms around her best friend. Harry walked, much slower than she, over to them.

"I-I'm so glad you o-ok." She sobbed into his shoulder. He patted her back awkwardly, eyes wide.

"Err...its-it's alright Hermione." She slowly released him and wiped her face, smiling for what looked like the first time today. Ron looked away from the girl and to Harry. There was a short silence between them. Ron opened his mouth to break it when Harry leaned forward and hugged his friend quickly.

"Don't ever do that again mate." He said softly as he pulled away. Ron grinned brightly.

"I'll try not to mate."

"Th-thank you for finding us." Ginny spoke cautiously from her bed. She reached up to nervously tug at her hair when she felt the tangled mess on top her head. Her eyes widened in horror.

"I wasn't the only one." Harry said, not really looking at her. He wasn't ready to forgive her yet.

He settled down on the edge of the bed and for the first time since Remus had flooed them Harry allowed himself to breath. Ron and Ginny were alright.

It had been nearly two weeks since the attack on Diagon Alley and things in their life had started settling down again. Ron was doing

much better, the pain had finally faded from his body and nearly all the physical marks from the attacks had disappeared. He had been confined to his bed for the first week, with the pain in his stomach and the lingering soreness in his ankle he was barely able to walk. Nearly everyday he was bedridden Harry and Hermione were with him.

They were slowly beginning to rebuild their friendship. There was still a lot of things that hadn't talked about, weren't ready to broach but at least now they were able to look each other in the eyes. Harry was glad to have his best friend back.

At the moment Harry was lounging on one of the long couches in the library. It was evening time, the sun was just beginning to set. Books of defensive magic and curse surrounded him but in his hands he held a small purple journal. His mother's song book. He ran his fingers over the words he had written on one of the blank pages. It had been a while since he had opened the book, since he had written anything. His life had become so hectic that he hadn't any time for music, it'd been months since the last time he had even touched his guitar. He shifted, sinking down lower into the cushions and placed his quill back to the paper. He looked around the room self-consciously; Hermione was also in the vast library looking for about the thousandth time more information on the founders. He knew she'd probably been through all the books at least twice already, he didn't know how she expected to find anything new.

With a content smile he continued writing, letting the words that had been swimming around his brain spill onto the paper.

He was so caught up in his writing he didn't even notice Catherine walk into the room until she leaned against the arm of his couch, placing her head in his line of vision. He started and the book fell from his hands and onto the floor, he hurriedly scooped it up and placed it in his lap.

"Did I scare you Daddy?" she asked, grinning.

"No." he mumbled, a smile tugging at his lips. "You just surprised me."

Cattie snorted and straightened up. "I just wanted to say goodnight. I'm going to take my bath and go to bed." She said.

Harry frowned slightly and glanced out the window. The sun was only just sinking beyond the horizon, it was still early. It was beyond unusual that Cattie was actually going to bed early, she usually whined for quite a bit before they forced her up to bed but she was actually going early? It was strange. Harry shrugged mentally; she had woken up rather early this morning, she was probably tired. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead.

"Alright, goodnight sweetheart. Sleep" He said, picking the journal up again. He wanted to get back to his writing before he lost his train of thought. Cattie hugged him quickly around the neck before fairly running out of the library. If Harry had been paying closer attention he would've been a bit more suspicious.

He was soon caught up in his song, completely forgetting where he was. He was once again caught off guard.

"Was that Cattie I heard?" Hermione asked from the foot of the couch. Harry jumped again but he managed to keep hold of the journal.

"Yeah, she said she was heading to bed." He answered her. Her eyebrows rose slightly but she nodded.

"Oh, so we're the only ones awake?" Hermione asked softly, her voice dropping an octave or two. She put down the book she had been holding in her hands and slowly made her way closer to Harry, a gleam in her eyes. Harry didn't notice, busy trying to wipe a few drops of ink from his hands.

"I guess, DeeDi and Manny are probably still-" he was cut short when Hermione climbed into his lap.

"Mi, what are you doing?" he asked, glancing nervously at the closed door of the library, expecting Cattie to come bounding back in at any second. Hermione smirked, the sight sent shivers down Harry's spine. She reached up and gently took the journal from his hands, lying in on an end table.

"I'm finishing what you started." She breathed and before he could speak she leaned forward and softly pressed her lips to his jaw. He inhaled sharply and pulled her closer to him. He felt her smile against his skin. Her hands slowly trailed up his strong arms, his shoulders, his neck and stopped when she reached his hair, threading her fingers through the dark strands. She trailed soft kisses across his jaw until she reached his lips. When they were just inches apart she looked into his eyes.

"I love you." She said softly, a warm smile on her face. He returned her smile with his own small, loving smile.

"I love you too." He leaned forward and closed the distance between them.

They kissed softly, each kiss full of love and tenderness. Harry let his hands slip down to her hips and pulled her if possible even closer. He had nearly forgotten how warm and soft her mouth was, how sweet she tasted. Soon they were forced to break apart for the annoying need to breathe. Harry placed kisses up her neck and to the spot just below her ear that always sent her melting in his arms. She made a small mewling noise and arched her back, pressing herself more firmly against him. He slid his mouth from behind her ear and onto the ear itself, he nipped it gently. She gasped loudly and arched again. He pulled his lips away from her ears and met hers again, kissing her deeply.

Before he knew it Harry had rolled them over until they were both lying on the couch. He felt Hermione's hands slide up his chest and her fingers start to unbutton the buttons of his red shirt. He placed his hands on her thighs and pressed her body closer to his. Hermione whimpered and Harry groaned at the contact. Hermione tore her lips from his.

"We-we need to get out of here." She gasped out, moving against him again.

"Yeah, yeah." He said through clenched teeth. They fairly tumbled right off of the couch and onto the floor. They stumbled out of the library, still pressed together, lips still managing to find each other. Harry could barely think past the feeling of Hermione's mouth and the

smaller body pressed against him but the very small part of him that wasn't thinking about her was nervous. He and Hermione had done some pretty serious kissing and quite a bit more but he was nervous. God knows he and Hermione hadn't come terribly close to crossing that line but there had always been something to stop them, this time he wasn't so sure it would come.

They were just passing Cattie's room, being extra careful as to not wake her when Harry felt his bare foot sink into a puddle. He pulled away from Hermione.

"What the hell?" he muttered, looking down at the soaked floor. Hermione stepped slightly back from him and looked down at the floor also. Water was seeping from under Catherine's bedroom door, puddling near their feet. Harry suppressed a groan of frustration and he and Hermione exchanged a look. Looks like they were postponing again. He didn't know how much more of this he could take. He grudgingly buttoned up his shirt.

Hermione stepped out of his arms and up to Cattie's door.

"Cattie?" she called through the door. "Is everything alright?"

There was the unmistakable sound of splashing. "It's fine Mum! Nothing's wrong." The girl called back.

Harry and Hermione exchanged another look. Something was definitely up. Harry reached for the knob as they heard more splashing. It was locked.

"Catherine. Open this door right now." He called. There was more splashing.

"I-I can't! I'm not decent!" Cattie yelled back. He narrowed his eyes and twitched his fingers. There was an audible click as the door unlocked.

Hermione pushed open the door. As soon as it opened water came pouring out into the hallway. They were both nearly swept off their feet.

“Catherine Elise Potter!” Hermione yelled, her voice full of anger and exasperation.

“I didn’t mean to!” Cattie exclaimed from the middle of her bedroom. She was soaked from head to toe and up to her shins in water. Moisture seemed to be dripping from everything in the room. Trouble was perched on top of the wardrobe looking beyond peeved, his fur damp and standing on end.

“What the hell-” Harry took a deep breath, forcing down his anger. “What happened?”

Cattie looked away, running a hand through her dripping curls. She was obviously trying to think up an excuse. She sighed heavily and looked down, she wasn’t going to lie to them.

“I was just...trying to practice water spells. Daddy said I just needed some practice, right Daddy?”

“Didn’t we tell you not to do magic we aren’t around?” Hermione said. She squished across the carpet and to the little girl, she knelt down in front of her. Cattie looked down.

“Yes but I just...” they waited for her to continue but she didn’t seem like she had any inclination to do so. Harry sighed and walked over to his family.

“Cattie...What has gotten into you lately?” he asked. The little girl’s bottle green eyes filled with tears.

“I just...I want to be able *help*. I always have to hide and...you guys always get hurt. I just want to help.” Both their eyes softened at her words and Hermione instantly pulled her into her arms, wet clothes and all.

“Sweetheart, you *do* help us. You give us focus and you remind us what to fight for.” She said softly to the tearful child. Harry reached over and placed a hand on top her head.

“You give us strength. We have you hide because we love you and we need to keep you safe.” The little girl sniffled mightily and nodded

against Hermione's shoulder. Harry smiled and stood up, slapping his thighs.

"Now, let's clean this room out. Again."

Hermione released the girl and stood up, pulling out her wand. She flicked it at the floor and the remaining water began to disappear, as if it was being sucked in by a giant sponge.

"Oh and Cattie?" she said. The little girl turned and looked at her curiously. "You're back on punishment."

The child seemed to deflate, pouting. She nodded miserably. Harry suppressed a smile and turned to start drying out Cattie's room.

It was hours before they got everything completely dry, Cattie and Trouble included. By the time they finished drying the carpet Catherine was already sound asleep in her bed.

"Done." Hermione whispered, lifting her wand from the floor. Harry sighed in relief and stretched, yawning. He was bone tired now, he wanted nothing more than to crawl into his and Hermione's bed and sleep until morning. Hermione looked just as worn as he. He sighed, there was no way that he and Hermione were going to continue their...activities tonight.

They each gave Cattie a goodnight kiss and as quietly as they could they left the bedroom.

Harry slung an arm over Hermione's shoulder as they walked the short distance to their bedroom, she leaned her head on his shoulder. He couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips. Even if he and Hermione hadn't gone that extra step they were still closer than most couples and sometimes a touch, a hug, or a cuddle was really all they needed.

"I'm going to take a shower." Hermione said when they stepped into their dimly lit bedroom. The light sprung on when the door closed.

“Alright.” He kissed her on the cheek and slipped his arm from around her waist. He threw himself down onto the bed and propped his head onto his arm, watching her as she gathered her clothes.

Everything she did seemed effortless, graceful. She searched through the wardrobe, a smile playing on her lips and her eyes warm. He loved seeing her like this, completely content, free of worry. She mesmerized him.

“Harry!” his voice shook him out of his thoughts. She stood there with her hands on her hips, looking at him with an eyebrow raised. She had obviously been talking to him. He felt heat rise to his face and he grinned apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I missed that.” He said. She shook her head at him.

“I said, you forgot your journal in the library.” She knew that the journal was special to him and she knew he’d hate to lose it.

Harry jumped to his feet, he had completely forgotten about it! “Oh! I’ll go get it.”

He was out the door in a flash, he could hear her laughing. He jogged lightly down the hallway, his bare feet slapping against the cool wooden flooring. He skidded into the library and retrieved the small purple book from the end table at the end of the couch. He rearranged the mused cushions on the couch, a grin growing on his face at the memory. They’d have to do that again.

He was still grinning as he headed back to his bedroom when there was a pop in front of him. DeeDi appeared in front of him, something clutched in her tiny wrinkled hands. Harry’s hand was already up and ready for a fight. He relaxed when he saw the elf.

“I am sorry I startled you Master.” She said, bowing slightly. Harry smiled warmly down at her and shook his head.

“No harm done DeeDi. Is there something you needed?” the elf nodded.

“Mr. Lupin floo called Master. He left before I could call you but he left something for you.” She handed him the thing in her hands.

Hesitantly Harry unrolled the thick parchment. It was the Daily Prophet. He was confused at first, why would Remus send him a copy of the Daily Prophet? The confusion instantly disappeared when he finally noticed the headline.

Wizarding World calls for change! Cornelius Fudge fired from Ministry!

A/N: Well I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. My computer crashed on me again so I'm a little slow to update, luckily I had this chapter saved elsewhere! I think I should explain the who Cosmas/Damian thing. Saints Cosmas and Damian were twins and early Christian martyrs, born in Cilicia, or in Arabia, who practiced the art of healing in the seaport of Ægea (modern Ayash) in the Gulf of Iskanderun, then in the Roman province of Syria. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, they accepted no payment for their services, which led them to be nicknamed *anargyroi* or *The Silverless*. It is said that by this, they led many to the Christian faith. I know I'm probably the only one who found that funny lol. Anywho thank you all for reading and reviewing! If I don't get to answering your reviews I just want you to know that they are greatly appreciated! Next chapter coming soon!

Chapter 27

He nearly dropped the paper in shock. Of all the things that he had expected to see that was not one of them. He shook his head and started reading.

Wizarding World calls for change! Cornelius Fudge fired from Ministry!

Report by Belinda Foster

Only two short weeks after the tragic and horrifying attack on Diagon Alley that killed over twenty and injured over fifty ex-Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge has been kicked out of office.

After the attack the wizarding world called to the Ministry for more security, more Aurors and for those, the Death eaters who attacked the Alley to be caught but Fudge refused. He refused to acknowledge the fact that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was behind the attack.

Even after protests, rallies, and petitions held by the wizarding people Fudge and the Ministry continued to deny both He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's involvement and refuse to add extra security in the still rebuilding Diagon Alley, Hogsmead Village, St. Mungos, and other heavily populated areas in the wizarding world.

The Wizarding people could take no more of the ex-Ministers more and more fervent and ridiculous denial of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's return to strength and many believe that is what brought on the attack.

At 11 o'clock this morning Cornelius Oswald Fudge officially 'resigned' from his position as Minister of Magic.

A new minister has yet to be selected....

The story continued on like that for a few more pages but Harry was too shocked to continue. He folded the paper slowly and tucked it into

the pocket of his jeans, shaking his head incredulously. Hermione has got to see it.

"What had Fudge been thinking?" he thought, barely suppressing a snort. The man should have known he wouldn't be able to keep Voldermont's involvement under wraps and he definitely should've known that people wouldn't continue to blindly believe everything he said. He shook his head again and continued down the hallway.

Hermione was out of the shower when he stepped back into their bedroom. She was sitting on top of the bed dressed in a pair of blue pajama pants and a sweatshirt, pulling her damp curls into a thick braid. She was staring into the fireplace, an odd sort of smile on her on her face. She didn't even look up until he closed the door. Her eyes shot to him and she blushed brightly.

"What took you so long?" she asked, smiling sheepishly. He grinned and padded across the room, he pulled the newspaper out of his pocket.

"Remus delivered something to me." He handed her the paper.

He watched her read it while he gathered his own pajamas from the wardrobe. Hermione's eyes widened at the headline and then a grin began tugging at her lips. She finished it must faster than he did but he didn't expect any less, she had superior reading skills. She refolded the paper with a satisfied smile and placed it on their bedside table.

"Finally." She grinned.

Harry returned her grin. "It was only a matter of time. I'm glad someone finally pulled their heads out of their asses and sacked him."

"Language." Hermione admonished him, the smile still on her face. "But I do agree. Maybe now that he's gone the Ministry will finally start taking some precautions against more attacks. Hopefully now people won't be kept in the dark and they'll be able to protect themselves." She yawned then and stretched out on the bed.

“Tired?”

“I’m exhausted.” She sighed, snuggling under the covers. Harry walked back over to the bed and dropped a quick kiss on her lips.

“Go on to sleep. I’m going to go and take a shower.”

Hermione nodded.

“Alright, goodnight.”

“Night.” He padded away from the bed and towards the bathroom. He heard Hermione whisper ‘Nox’ and the lights were extinguished, the only light coming from the lowly lit fireplace.

He slipped into the large bathroom and quickly shed his clothing. The shower started immediately and he stepped into the hot spray.

He took his time in the shower, letting the water soothe his aching muscles. He yawned widely and nearly drowned, water filling his mouth. It had taken a lot of magic to return Cattie’s room to its original state and he was completely exhausted. He had wanted to just call the elves and ask them to restore the room but Hermione was convinced that it was way to late at night to bother them; he thought that was a bit ridiculous, it was their job and they enjoyed it! But he wasn’t going to argue with Hermione.

He finally left the comfort of the shower and dressed for bed before leaving the steam filled bathroom. He walked silently across the room and over to the bed. He gingerly slid under the blankets, carefully as not to jar Hermione. As soon as he had settled Hermione turned over and wrapped her arms around his waist, laying her head on his chest, legs instantly wrapping around his. He smiled softly and slid his arms around her, resting his cheek against the top of her head. They often slept like this, curled up together.

“Love you.” Hermione murmured, eyes still closed.

Harry pressed his lips to her forehead. “Love you too.”

He snuggled even close to her and soon they both fell asleep.

“Ok, what if I stay out of the library for the rest of the week?”

Harry sighed heavily and gripped the fork in his hand tighter. He had to grit his teeth from snapping at the little girl across from him, or giving in to her. Ever since they had woken up that morning Catherine had been trying her hardest to get Harry and Hermione to drop her punishment. She had tried pleading, begging, whining, and now at the breakfast table she had resorted to bargaining.

“No Cattie.” He sighed.

Cattie frowned and looked down at her plate. Her eyes suddenly lit up. “What if I eat all my fruits *and* my vegetables?”

Hermione put down the book she was holding and turned to the child.

“Catherine no. Your father and I have already told you your punishment and we’re not changing it.”

Cattie scowled glumly down at her plate, slumping in her chair. Harry forced himself to look away from her pitiful expression, if he looked at her too long he’d give in.

Hermione shook her head and picked her book back up, burying her nose in it and trying to eat at the same time. He smiled slightly, remembering her doing just this thousands of times in the Great Hall. He tucked back in to his breakfast of eggs, bacon, and fried tomatoes. He had just gotten his fork to his mouth when Hedwig flew through the doorway and landed in front of him on the tabletop. Hermione dropped her book, Cattie let out a short scream before realizing it was Hedwig and grinning, and Harry dropped his fork.

“Hedwig!” he exclaimed. The pure white owl blinked her large amber eyes at him, hooting softly. He smiled softly at his pet and reached out and ran his fingers softly over her feathers.

“Hey girl, I haven’t seen you in a while.” She hooted again, tilting her head. The owl spent most of her time out flying around and hunting, she had become quite restless now that Harry wasn’t sending any

letters. Speaking of letters there was a folded piece of parchment clutched in Hedwig's beak. With raised eyebrows Harry reached down and took the letter from the bird's beak. He hadn't gotten any letters in quite a while, he didn't want to risk sending anything and giving anyone a way to track them here. The house-elves had assured him that nothing with any kind of tracking spell would make it past the wards around the cottage but he was still wary.

As soon as the bird was free of its burden it hopped from in front of Harry and over to Cattie who promptly began feeding her pieces of bacon.

"Who's it from?" Hermione asked, leaning forward. Harry turned the piece of parchment over. On the back his and Hermione's names were scrawled messily. He grinned when he recognized the handwriting.

"Ron." Hermione pushed her book aside completely and scooted closer to him so she could read over his shoulder. He tore open the envelope and pulled a piece of parchment out.

Hey guys,

Things are pretty good here, I'm doing loads better and Ginny's good too. Mom's been driving me nuts though, she won't leave me alone for two seconds! I swear she expects me to drop dead if she isn't by my side. Anyway I got a letter from Neville, the DA want to meet us at Diagon Alley to talk. I don't know what they want to talk about but I guess it must be important. Anyway they want us to meet them at the Cauldron at 1 today. I hope you guys can be there, I hope mum will let me out of the house.

Ron

Harry put down the letter and turned to Hermione, eyebrow raised. Her brows were furrowed thoughtfully.

"Should we go?" he asked. She shrugged.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt..."

"We should go then, Ron seems to think that it's something important. I wonder what they want to talk to us about?"

"I have no idea." Hermione leaned back and checked the clock on the far wall.

"We've a couple of hours until one. Do you think Remus and Tonks would mind watching Cattie?" she glanced over to the little girl who was scratching Hedwig's feathers and speaking softly to the bird.

"They wouldn't mind, they love her." He pushed his plate away and stood up. "I'm going to floo call them and ask though."

Hermione nodded, standing up herself and tucking her book under her arm. Cattie looked up from the bird and looked at them curiously.

"Where are we going?" she asked. Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance.

"Your mum and I have to go visit with a few friends." Harry answered her. The little girl sighed and rolled her eyes.

"And I have to stay with Moony and Tonks?" she knew the drill. Harry smiled apologetically and leaned over to kiss her quickly on the forehead.

"Sorry, luv."

She shrugged, standing up. Hedwig flew onto her shoulder. "It's ok, I like seeing Tonks, Moony, and Draco." She picked another piece of bacon off of her plate before it disappeared and fed it to the bird before padding out of the room.

"I'm going to get dressed!" she called over her shoulder.

"Do you think it's safe to go to Diagon Alley?" Hermione asked, turning to him after the little girl had disappeared up the stairs. Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I don't see why not. Plus we can take care of ourselves." He grinned.

“Go floo Remus and Tonks superman.” Hermione snorted, pushing him towards the doorway.

“Don’t push the man of steel!” he shouted, backing down the hallway. He could still hear her laughing as he stepped into the family room. He crossed the room and over to the fireplace, he grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar on top of the mantel and kneeled in front of the low burning fire. He threw the bright green powder into the flames and they flared brightly, turning green.

“I hate this.” He muttered before sticking his head into the fire. **“12 Grimmauld Place!”**

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, pressing his lips together to keep the ash out of his mouth and his breakfast in. He doubted he’d ever get used to the feeling of his head spinning while he body stood completely still. Luckily the trip was over quickly and soon he was peering into Remus and Tonk’s warm living room.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” he shouted. There was silence for a few minutes before he heard slow, shuffling footsteps make their way closer to him. Slightly swollen ankles and a large stomach shrouded in purple came into view and the person slowly lowered themselves down in front of the fireplace. Tonks came into view, her pale blonde hair pulled away from her face and eyes practically glowing. She had a hand on her round stomach. She was a lot larger than she had been a couple of weeks ago, it seemed like everyday she got bigger and bigger. He didn’t think the baby was going to wait until November.

“Hey Harry.” Tonks said, grinning.

“Hey Tonks! You’re looking...well.” She laughed lightly and rubbed her stomach.

“Yeah, the boy’s growing even faster than we expected.” She laughed again. “He’s ruining my girlish figure. So, what brings you to my fireplace?”

“I was wondering if you and Remus would mind keeping an eye on Cattie while Hermione and I go down to Diagon Alley.”

Tonks frowned. "Of course we wouldn't mind but do you think it's safe for the two of you to be going to Diagon Alley so soon after the attacks?"

"It'll be fine, Hermione and I can take care of ourselves."

She smiled a small smile. "I have no doubt about that. So when are you guys going to get here?"

"We should be by in a couple of hours."

"Alright, we'll be ready then. We're actually fixing up the nursery today, we can put Cattie to work. How long do you think you guys will be out?"

"I'm not really sure, maybe two or three hours. We'll be back before dark though."

Tonks had a strange expression on her face. "Alright, I'll see you in a couple of hours but right now I really have to go to the bathroom."

"Err, ok I'll just-" before he could finish his sentence Tonks grabbed something out of his sight and pulled herself to her feet. She was shuffling out of the room in seconds. "Ok." He muttered to the now empty room. He shrugged and pulled his head out of the fire.

The house was quiet when he left the family room. He was just about to head towards the staircase when he ran straight into Hermione.

"Oh! I was just coming to see if you were still talking to Remus and Tonks."

He grinned. "They'll keep an eye on her. You should see Tonks though, it looks like that baby will be here sooner than we thought."

Hermione squealed. "I'm so excited, we really should get something for him while we're at Diagon Alley. We'll have to go a bit earlier though." Her smile faded and she frowned. "Most of the shops are still closed, I forgot."

“We could stop in muggle London.” He shrugged, turning to head up the stairs. Hermione grabbed his wrist and checked his watch.

“I guess if we go in the next few minutes we’ll have time to go to muggle London then meet the DA.”

He shrugged again. “Sound fine to me, we’ll have to floo Remus and Tonks again though.”

“I’ll do it. Can you go and make sure Cattie’s dressed?” she kissed him quickly on the cheek before turning and jogging back down the stairs and back into the fireplace. He turned and continued upstairs and down the hallway to Cattie’s bedroom. He knocked on the door and when he heard her call of ‘Come in’ he turned the knob and stepped into the sunny bedroom.

Cattie was standing in front of her wardrobe with its doors wide open digging through the clothes.

“What are you looking for?” he asked, stepping over a book and nearly tripping over a stuffed lion. The room was a mess but that was to be expected. As another part of her punishment the house-elves weren’t allowed to clean her room, she had to do it herself.

“I’m looking for my blue tennies.” She answered him, her voice sounding muffled from inside of the wardrobe. She popped out of the closet with a sigh. She was wearing a pair of flared khakis and a pale blue t-shirt. Red and yellow striped socks peeked out from the bottom of her pants.

He flicked his fingers and the pair of blue and white shoes flew from under her bed and landed in her hands. “Maybe if you clean your room it’d be easier to find things.”

“I cleaned it! A little bit.” She muttered the last bit, color staining her cheeks. Harry glanced around the room with an eyebrow raised; her bookshelves were clean, all the books straightened and her bed was made but toys and a few books still littered the floor, not to mention the clothes that were on top of her toy box and the ragged shape her wardrobe was in. He shook his head; at least she had tried.

“We’ll talk about that later, we’re going to be leaving a bit earlier than before. Can you get ready really quickly please?” the little girl nodded and sat down to pull her shoes on. Harry ruffled her curls.

“Thanks love. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes and then we’ll leave, ok?”

She smiled up at him. “Ok Daddy.”

He rubbed her hair again, smiling warmly. He had never really thought of himself as ever being a father but now, every time he looked at this little girl or every time she said ‘Daddy’ so sweetly he couldn’t imagine himself as anything else.

With another smile at the child he left the room, closing the door behind him. He walked down the hallway towards his and Hermione’s bedroom to find his own shoes. Lucky for him the elves were still cleaning their room, despite Hermione’s protests, so he wouldn’t have to search for them. He walked through the open door and just as he expected his shoes were lined up next to the wardrobe. He pulled them on quickly then grabbed a black pullover from the wardrobe, pulling it on over his white shirt, then selected Hermione’s dark blue jacket. He took his bag from the post it was hanging on inside the wardrobe and slung it over his shoulder. When he went to grab both his and Hermione’s casual black robes something fell out of the pocket of his robes, hitting the bottom of the wardrobe with a dull thud. Confused, he reached inside and grasped the small dark thing. His hand came in contact with worn leather and he pulled it out into the light. It was the dagger he had gotten from Mundungus. He had forgotten all about it. He turned it over in his hands, looking over it warily. It reminded him of the daggers they used to destroy the horcruxes but unlike those this one didn’t give off the same pure, cleansing feeling; something about it felt dirty...wrong. He went to put it back in the wardrobe but something stopped him. He looked at it again before quickly stuffing it into his bag. He grabbed the robes, gathered Hermione’s shoes from the floor and strode out of the room.

For the second time that day he ran into Hermione.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this.” She joked.

He grinned at her around the pile of stuff in his arms. "You know you like it."

She laughed and took her jacket, shoes, and robes out of his arms. "You'd like to think. Thank you for getting my things." He shrugged.

"It's no problem." He slung his bag over his shoulder, folded his robe and tucked it into the bag. With a sly smile Hermione flicked her wrist and a smaller light colored shoulder bag came flying out of their bedroom. Harry looked at her in wide eyed shock.

"When'd you learn that?!"

"You're not the only one with a few tricks up your sleeve." She winked at him before turning and walking down the hallway towards Cattie's room. A slow grin spread across his face as he followed her. Of all the things he loved about Hermione her intelligence was the first thing that got him.

"Are you ready Cattie?" Hermione asked, tapping on the child's door. It swung open and Cattie stepped out, pulling her red backpack on.

"Yep! I'm ready." She answered, grinning up at them.

"Alright then, lets go." Harry said, slipping his hand through the little girl's. Hermione led the way downstairs and into the family room. She didn't hesitate to scoop Cattie into her arms and grab a handful of floo powder from the mantle.

"See you in a few minutes." She said to Harry before stepping into the flames with Cattie in her arms. Cattie offered him a quick smile before Hermione shouted out the address and they disappeared in a swirl of bright green flames. He waited a few seconds after they'd disappeared before grabbing his own handful of sparkling powder and throwing it into the fire.

"12 Grimmauld Place!"

A strong hand grabbed him before he stumbled and hit the ground. Remus steadied him before pulling him into a hug.

“Harry! How are you Cub?” he said happily once he released the younger man. He looked just as happy as Tonks had earlier. He wasn’t wearing his usual robes but instead whether worn looking faded jeans and an old t-shirt. Flecks of paint decorated his clothing and bare feet.

“I’m fine Remus. What’ve you been doing?” he asked the older man. Remus grinned, looking down at his clothes.

“We’ve been fixing up the baby’s nursery.” He said, jerking his head in the direction of the stairs.

“Can I see it?” Cattie asked excitedly, tugging Remus’s arm. She and Hermione were standing a bit behind Remus.

Remus nodded. “Of course you can sweetie, its not finished yet though.”

Cattie shrugged before turning on her heel and practically bounced to the staircase. The older people exchanged an amused look before following the child up the stairs.

“So how has Tonks been doing?” Harry asked Remus as they climbed the stairs. The man’s face lit up at the mention of his wife.

“She’s been doing great. We went back to St. Mungos a couple of days ago and the baby is growing even faster than we had expected. Our MediWitch thinks that he’ll probably be here even sooner than November but we can’t be sure exactly when.”

“That’s great!” Hermione exclaimed, grinning.

“Yes it is. It puts us in a bit of a rush to get everything ready for him though.” Remus chuckled.

They soon made it to the top of the stairs. They followed Remus to the end of the hall and to an open door next to his and Tonks’s bedroom. They could hear voices and laughter even before they stepped into the bedroom.

Tonks was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a thin book on her lap which she was rapidly flipping through, giggling. Malfoy was standing over what appeared to be a pile of dark colored wood with his wand out, a crooked grin on his face. Both he and Tonks were splattered in paint and when Harry took a look around the room he could see why. The top half of the walls were painted in stripes, dark and light blue, and the bottom was paneled dark wood. Little shelves were built into the walls and over the large windows. It obviously wasn't completed but they could already tell it was going to be a beautiful room.

Two pale blonde heads turned to them when they stepped into the soon-to-be nursery. The smile fell from Malfoy's face, replaced by a dark scowl.

"Hey guys!" Tonks said happily. Cattie bounced away from the doorway and over to the sitting woman, throwing her small arms around Tonks's neck.

"Hey Tonks!"

"Hello there little bit." Tonks chuckled, squeezing her. Cattie released her and to everyone's surprise, especially Malfoy, she walked over to him and hugged him around the waist. He looked down at the child in shock for a second before patting her on top of the head awkwardly. She pulled away from him after a second and plopped down on the floor next to Tonks.

"What are you guys doing?" she asked, peering at the book in Tonk's hands.

"We're trying to put the baby's crib together." She answered her once she got over her shock.

"Do you need any help?" Hermione asked, stepping further into the brightly lit room. Tonks turned another page and scanned it quickly then shook her head, grinning.

"Nope!" she handed the thin book to Draco who glanced at it before smiling himself. He tucked it under his arm before raising his wand over the pile of polished wood.

“Accommodo Consummo!” he shouted the spell, waving his wand. The pile instantly jumped into action. They bent, fastened together, so fast they could barely see what was happening. In seconds they could see what the pile of wood was.

A dark wood crib stood in the middle of the room. It looked like a smaller version of Remus and Tonks’s sleigh bed. It had an elegant sloping front side and a curved back. The bars were thick but not too close together.

Remus walked over to the finished crib and ran his hand over the cool dark wood. He met Tonks’s eyes and they shared a small smile, happiness practically glowing from the both of them.

“Good job. It looks great.” Remus said after he tore his eyes away from his wife, squeezing Draco’s shoulder. The teen shrugged, looking away.

“It just took us a while to find the correct spell.” He said speaking for the first time since the Potter’s had entered the room.

Tonks stood slowly and placed a hand on the crib. “It’s perfect.” She looked down at her stomach. “What do you think little man?”

They all chuckled, Malfoy rolling his eyes.

“This is going to be a beautiful nursery.” Hermione said, looking around the room.

“Is there anything you guys need?” Harry asked. Hermione shot him a look at his not-so subtle question. He only shrugged in return.

Remus shrugged. “Nothing I can really think about at the moment.” Tonks nodded in agreement.

“Me neither.”

They talked for a couple more minutes before Harry and Hermione decided it was time for them to get a move on. Tonks, Remus, and Cattie were soon walking them to the door, Malfoy having opted to stay upstairs.

"We shouldn't be gone more than a few hours." Hermione said, squeezing Cattie's hand as the group walked into the living room. The little girl had gotten over her happiness at seeing Tonks and Remus and now she wanted to go with her parents.

"You'll have a good time with Moony and Tonks." Harry agreed, smiling down at the child.

"But I want to go with *you*." Cattie pouted, leaning against his leg.

"I know Kitty-Cat but we don't know if its safe enough for you yet." He leaned down and kissed her on top of the head. "We won't be gone long. We'll bring you something back."

She leaned away slightly, looking up at him with raised eyebrows. "Like what?"

"It'll be a surprise." Hermione answered before leaning over to give her daughter her own kiss. Cattie frowned but nodded and released her hold on her Daddy's leg. She hugged Hermione around the waist then let go of her hand.

"Ok, it better be a good one!"

Hermione rolled her eyes then hugged Tonks and Remus. "We'll see you guys in a few hours."

"We'll bring you back something too." Harry said, winking, after receiving hugs from both Remus and Tonks.

"Candy." Tonks said sternly, pointing a finger at him. He snorted and patted her round stomach.

"Are you sure you want candy? You seem to be putting on a bit of weight." She slapped him rather hard on the back of the head.

Remus shook his head at the both of them. "Have fun you two and be careful."

"We'll be fine." Hermione assured them. She and Harry each gave another hug and kiss to their daughter before walking over to the door.

“Bye!” they heard Cattie shouting just before the door closed behind them.

They started down the sidewalk and to the alley in silence. The street was just as quiet and empty as it always was, the only sounds their footsteps and the distant sound of traffic. They made it to the alley without any incident. Hermione took up her usual spot as lookout, which wasn't really necessary consider no one was ever around, and Harry reached into his bag and pulled out his shrunken bike. He placed it on the ground and with a wide grin he pulled out his rarely used wand and tapped it. The bike quickly returned to its original size.

“Ready?” He asked, pulling their helmets out of the compartment. Hermione took the one he was handing her.

“As always.” She pulled it on smiling. Harry shook his head before pulling his own helmet on and swinging onto the bike. He waited until Hermione had settled comfortably behind him, her arms wrapping around his waist, before he started the bike. It roared to life and he pulled out of the alley.

They zipped through the muggle streets slower than Harry preferred, Hermione trying to find acceptable stores.

“Do you see anything yet?” Harry practically groaned as he turned down another street.

“Over there!” she exclaimed, pointing to a parking lot a little ways away from them. The parking lot was in the center of a cluster of boutiques. Harry sighed in relief and pulled around a small car and into the parking lot. He found a slot quickly, the lot fairly empty considering there were very few people around.

Hermione slid off the bike first and took off her helmet, shaking her curls. Harry stepped off after her and slipped his helmet off. Hermione tucked both of the helmets into the compartment.

“Are you sure you want to buy something here?” Harry asked, suppressing a wince as he looked at the shops surrounding them. They were all in light colored brick with reddish roofs. Most of them had strange names like ‘Lacy Socks and Booties’ or ‘Cherished

Moments' and quite a few were in French. Sure he guessed it was nice or something but it all seemed kind of...girly. Remus and Tonks were having a *boy*.

"It's not that bad Harry." Hermione said, rolling her eyes, obviously knowing what he was thinking. "I've been here before with my mum when a friend of hers was having a baby." He glanced over at her, peering into her face. Usually a mention of her parents or a memory of them would bring a slight sparkling to her eyes and sadness would always creep its way onto her face but now all he saw was a small smile and a warmth in her eyes. He felt something in him unclench. She was happier, the pain of the death of her parents seemed to finally be fading a bit. She was able to remember them with happiness instead of pain. He hadn't known how much he had wanted her to finally start to come to terms with it. Seeing that she was slowly beginning to heal freed something in him, it was like he had been holding his breath for a very long time.

"I guess it won't be too bad..." he said, smiling slightly. Hermione grinned and grabbed his arm, dragging him to the nearest shop. They stepped up onto the sidewalk and Hermione pulled open the door to 'Lacy Socks and Booties'. There was a soft ding of a bell as the door opened and they walked in.

"I love this place." Hermione said as she looked around the quaint shop. The entire shop was decorated in soft whites and tans. Shelves lined the walls and middle aisles. Sunlight pored in from round windows and the large panes of glass that were the front windows. Soft music flowed through the store. A short blonde woman was standing on a stool at the far end of the room, trying to put stuffed animals on a shelf quite a ways above her head. Even from where they were standing they could hear her cursing rather creatively under her breath as she strained to reach the shelf. With a growl she stepped off of the stool, throwing the toy in the general direction of the shelf. She turned on her heel and jumped, brown eyes widening when she saw the couple standing in the doorway.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her slightly rounded face coloring. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. Can I help you with anything?" she ran her

hands down the front of her brown apron and smiled a friendly smile. A nametag reading 'Amy' was clipped to the apron.

"We're trying to find a gift for a friend of ours, they're expecting a son." Hermione said, returning her smile.

"Well you've come to the right place. We have just about anything you could ever need for a baby. Is there anything in particular you're looking for?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, not really. We'll just browse a bit if that's ok."

"Of course it is!" Amy said, waving her hand dismissively. "I'll probably *still* be over here if you need anything." She glared at the basket holding the stuffed animals she had been trying to place on the shelf.

"Do you need any help?" Harry asked. He had a few inches on her, he could easily reach the shelf.

She smiled thankfully. "Thank you but I couldn't trouble you."

He shook his head and walked over to the shelf. "It's no problem." He picked up the basket and tucked it under one arm, he put the soft dark brown bears on the shelf.

"What's this for?" he asked turning the last bear over in his hands. It was small, about the size of the palm of his hand and on the back there was a small white knob. Amy stepped away from Hermione, who she had been having a polite conversation with, and over to Harry. She took the bear from his hands.

"It's called a 'Sounds of the Womb Bear'." She turned the knob and a strange sound emitted from the toy. It was soft, repetitive but somehow...warm and soothing. Amy turned the knob again and the bear went silent.

"It's supposed to be used in the first couple of months after birth, you put it in the crib and it keeps the baby calm and helps them sleep. My girls are three and it still works for them!"

“We should get one.” Hermione said. Amy handed her the bear in her hands and Hermione squeezed it gently.

“That’s a good idea, they work amazingly well with new babies.” Amy nodded.

The sound of a phone ringing interrupted their conversation.

“I have to get that. Feel free to keep browsing!” The little blonde woman was gone in a flash, practically jogging over to a counter at the front of the store.

“This is all we need right?” Harry asked, gesturing to the toy in Hermione’s hand.

She shook her head. “Of course not. We might find something even better.”

He suppressed a groan and followed her down the nearest aisle. They passed rows of diapers, furniture, and they soon stepped into a circular area full of little clothes. Hermione suddenly squealed and ran over to a bin next to a rack of clothes, pulling out a little brown hat with ears on the top.

“Oh! Look how adorable!” she squealed, rubbing the fuzzy ears. “We have to get this too-” she gasped and reached into the bin again and pulled out a little brown jacket with attached mittens shaped like paws.

“I think we’ll need a basket.” Harry grinned, shaking his head.

They left the shop about an hour with a bag full of clothes, toys, and a ton of other stuff Hermione somehow couldn’t resist. Harry had to admit, some of the stuff was pretty cute.

“Thank you for shopping! It was nice to meet you!” Amy called to them as they walked out of the shop and back onto the shaded sidewalk. Harry checked his watch quickly, it was already after 1:30, and they needed to hurry.

They waved at the woman before jogging across the parking lot and back over to the gleaming bike. Hermione stashed the white shopping

bag into the compartment while Harry took out their helmets. Hermione shook her head when Harry handed her one of them.

"We need a car Harry." She said. He rolled his eyes, he wasn't even going to bother answering her.

"Yeah, yeah." He pulled his helmet on and jumped onto the bike. Hermione slid on after him, pinching him hard on the side.

"Ow! What was that for?!" he exclaimed, his voice sounding loud through the helmets. The engine roared to life and he pulled out of the parking lot.

"That was a very little pain compared to the pain you'll feel if you run into a pole or if your brain is scattered all over the street."

"It has anti-crash charms on it Hermione."

"I know they are Harry but I read the bike's manual, it can only protect you if there are up to two people on the bike at a time. Do you really want to risk something happening to Cattie?"

Harry flinched. He had never seen the point in them having a car but to think that having the bike would in anyway put her in danger...he couldn't deal with that. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if something happened to her.

"Fine. I'll think about it." He grumbled. He felt Hermione squeeze him a bit tighter around the waist and her lips touch his neck briefly.

"That's all I ask."

They sped through the muggle streets, making their way to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry, surprisingly, only got lost once before he rolled onto a familiar street. The familiar sight of the shabby looking pub came into view and Harry pulled the bike into a small spot between a sports car and a ragged van. He cut the engine and got off of the bike, Hermione after him. They tucked away their helmets before linking hands and walking towards the door of the pub.

“Are you sure your ready for this?” Hermione asked, looking at the pub’s door with clear apprehension in her eyes. Harry could feel his own apprehension and nervousness rising, he wasn’t really sure if he was ready to face everyone from Hogwarts. He swallowed hard and took a tighter grip on his fiancé’s hand, pulling himself to full height.

“Yeah, I’m ready.” She said firmly, squaring her shoulders. They stepped into the pub. Just like the last time the quiet murmur of the very few people inside the pub was immediately silenced at their arrival. Harry ignored the too curious eyes watching them and scanned the room for any of the DA or the flash of red hair that usually indicated Ron. They didn’t have to wait long.

“Harry! Hermione! Over here!” a voice shouted, rather unnecessarily, from across the room. It was Neville. His face colored quickly and he slouched down in his seat when every eye in the room turned sharply to him. Neville, Luna, Dean, Seamus, Fred and George, Cho, and Ron were all sitting in a booth in the far corner of the pub. The booth was partially shadowed, hidden from most of the patrons. Harry grinned and Hermione waved, they made their way over to the booth. Ron stood up when he saw them and Hermione instantly drew him into a hug, carefully because he was still pretty sore.

“Hey Ron.” She grinned. “Hello everyone.” She said once she pulled away. Harry shook Ron’s hand firmly, grinning at him.

“Hello Hermione, Harry.” Luna said in her usual dreamy way, smiling widely. “Sit, we can start our discussion.”

Everyone else said their greetings and Ron sat back down at the booth, having to slide all the way down so he was seated close to Luna so Harry and Hermione could sit next to him. Harry looked around at the few members of the DA. They all looked somber, even Fred and George, and they all seemed somehow...older. Neville, who was sitting across from them, had lost the roundness in his cheeks revealing a rather strong face. Seamus had a scar on his face, running from his left ear to his jaw, it was only a slight lighter shade than the rest of his skin. Ron had told them they he had gotten hit in the face with a rather vicious cutting curse during the attack. Dean’s hair was shorter than he remembered and he was obviously taller,

Seamus who was sitting next to him now barely reached his chin. His mouth was set in a hard line, his usual smile gone from his face. Cho was looking away from them, when they had first sat down Harry had caught her eye and she had turned away quickly, her pale face turning bright red. Ron was pale, his freckles standing out starkly from his skin and his hair looking an even brighter red than usual though limp. He moved himself around gingerly, charms and potions had done a lot to heal his bruises and broken bones but he was still sore and the potions he was still taking kept him feeling ill and tired; he sat up straight though, eyes burning with determination. As for Luna she looked pretty much the same as she had the last time they had seen her at Diagon Alley though her eyes weren't as vacant and dreamy as they once were, they were sharp and attentive, it was almost shocking to see it on her face. From the way they were all sitting, tense, looking at the couple this was going to be quite a serious conversation.

"Where's Ginny?" Hermione asked, breaking the almost awkward silence that had settled over the group.

"She's at the Burrow, mum hasn't let her step out of the house since the attack." Fred answered her.

George nodded. "Not that she's wanted to."

Harry leaned forward, clasping his hands together on top of the stained table. "So what did you guys want to talk to us about?" he asked, eyeing the group. They obviously had something important to talk to them about and he wasn't in the mood to beat around the bush.

The group glanced between one another, obviously trying to decide who would speak first when George sighed heavily and began.

"We want to start the DA again. Ron told us that you two aren't coming back to Hogwarts this year and all but we still need the DA, we still need to know how to actually defend ourselves."

"You guys did pretty well during the attack from what I hear." Hermione said, leaning back.

Neville shrugged. "We got lucky. We barely made it out alive in the fight with those death eaters. We knew a few spells that kept them from killing us immediately but in the end they all got away anyway. When we get back to Hogwarts, no matter who the new defense professor is, they won't teach us anything we need to know. They might teach us a few shielding spells or something but we need to know how to fight." Everyone was nodding by the end of his little speech. Harry was shocked. This was the first time he had ever seen Neville talk so much and with so much passion, well when he wasn't talking about herbology.

"We can't keep letting the death eaters get away with what they're doing." Cho said, speaking for the first time. She met their eyes directly. "All the Aurors have been doing is stunning and just stunning these people and it isn't working and it never will."

Dean leaned forward. "We need to know how to protect our families and ourselves."

Harry opened his mouth to say something when he noticed that the very few patrons of the pub were trying their hardest to listen in, including Tom. He flicked his wrist and a blue dome flashed around them for a split-second before disappearing.

"What was that?" Seamus asked, looking around warily.

"A silencing charm, the last thing we need if for people to overhear us." He answered him. He looked over at Hermione, hoping to see what she thought of all this. She nodded, a small grim smile on her lips. He understood what she was thinking. He thought this was a great idea, that they did need to know how to really fight for themselves but at the same time it was painful to see their friends thrust into this war. He knew that this fight was going to involve everyone but apart of him had begun to believe that it was all about him and his family, that it was about him defeating Voldemort but as he looked into the grim, determined faces of the people around him he was forcefully reminded that this affected everyone. All of their lives depended on how they could fight and if they needed his help he sure as hell was going to give it to them.

“So, where are we going to do this?” he grinned. The serious expressions broke from Fred and George’s faces, the huge grins they were so used to seeing on their faces returning. Ron let out a breath and leaned back into the cushioned booth. Everyone seemed to sag with relief.

“We haven’t actually thought about that yet.” Ron said, shrugging.

Cho nodded. “We can’t use the room of requirement for a number of reasons but I can’t think of another place to use.”

“I think we have somewhere we can go.” Hermione said. Harry furrowed his brows, confused. Hermione turned and looked at him, her own eyebrows raised in a meaningful way. His eyes widened and his mouth nearly dropped open when he realized where she was thinking. Had she lost her mind?!

“Where?” Dean asked.

“Our house.” They looked as shocked as Harry did, that was the last place they had expected her to suggest. They knew Harry and Hermione had been hiding out somewhere and that no one had any idea where they were so for her to suggest them using their house was a little shocking. Harry could only shake his head, he trusted Ron and the twins but he wasn’t really all that sure about everyone else finding out about the only place where neither Dumbledore or Voldemort could find them. Hermione continued on, ignoring their shock. “We trust you guys but I’ll have to find a spell to make sure none of you can reveal the location.”

“Like the spell you used last year?” Cho asked Hermione, her voice hard and a glare on her face. She obviously still hadn’t completely forgiven them for the Marietta incident yet. Hermione’s eyes narrowed and Harry could see her hands clench ever so slightly.

“In a sense, yes.”

The table descended into an awkward, tense silence.

“So, when do you think we can start?” Neville said, thankfully breaking the silence.

"As soon as possible would be best." Luna said, looking up from the necklace of beads she had been rolling around in her fingers.

Fred nodded. "Yeah, I want to get started soon."

"How about next week? I know it sounds like a long time but I need time to find the correct spell."

"We can owl you guys when everything is ready." Harry said.

Neville checked his watch and looked around the near empty pub quickly. "That's a good idea. I'm sorry everyone but I need to be getting home, I told my gram I'd be home ten minutes ago." He stood up and Fred and George slid out so he could get out of the booth. Harry looked at him in surprise, he was a lot taller than he had remembered. He leaned over and shook Harry's then Hermione's hands.

"It was good to see you two again." He said earnestly. "I'll be seeing you next week."

"It was good to see you too, Nev." Harry grinned.

Hermione smiled warmly at the boy. "Be careful." She said. He nodded, grinning. He bid farewell to the rest of the group before waving one last time and walking over to the fireplace.

"We should be going too." Seamus said, jerking his head at Dean.

"We have to meet my mum." Dean agreed. "Seamus is staying the summer with me and my family." He said to the others, noticing their curious looks. He reached out and shook everyone's hand.

"I guess I'll be seeing you guys next week." He said. Seamus waved to the smaller group and he and Dean left them, stepping out the door leading to Diagon Alley. Fred and George steeled back into their seats next to Cho, across from Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Luna. The blonde girl had gone back to staring at the beaded necklace she was winding around her thin fingers. Ron was looking anywhere but at Harry and Hermione's still clasped hands. Hermione gently slid her hand from Harry's and threaded her fingers together. Harry frowned

slightly and glanced quickly at Ron. They had talked about his and Hermione's relationship and for the most part Ron seemed okay with it, Harry knew his friend still had feelings for Hermione and it would probably be a long time before he completely got over them if he ever did. It would be a long time before things were back to normal between the three of them.

"So, what kind of things do you think we'll need to work on?" Cho said, breaking the only slightly uncomfortable silence.

"Offensive spells." George said firmly.

Fred nodded. "Get them before they can get us."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea. If we're going to be fighting death eaters we have to know how to attack." Harry agreed.

"Do you really think...do you really think we'll be involved in another attack? That they'll be another one?" Cho's voice shook on the last word.

Harry looked directly into her eyes. "I have no doubt they'll be another one, they'll be a lot more. Voldermort is going to show just how powerful he is, just how much hold he has over the wizarding world and just how much fear he can make everyone feel and he's going to destroy a lot of lives in the process. Everyone is going to be involved because when there's another attack it'll affect every single one of us."

"And we have to do something." Luna said fiercely. She had dropped the necklace and she, for the first time since the 'meeting' had started, was looking directly at them, the dreamy faraway quality gone for her eyes and replaced by a burning determination. Ron had told them that her father had been seriously hurt in the attack, he was still at St. Mungo's.

"We will." Ron said.

Luna smiled gratefully at him before standing up, wrapping the necklace around her thin wrist.

"I have to be leaving. I promised my father I'd read him the last issue of the Quibbler."

"Doesn't he write the Quibbler?" George asked, eyebrows raised. "Shouldn't he already *know* what's in it?" Her smile faltered and her eyes slid away from them.

"Yes but...he can't-he took a pretty bad hit to the head during the attack...he can't remember anything that happened in the last few months."

"Oh Luna, I'm-I'm so sorry!" Hermione exclaimed, a hand covering her mouth. They had known that Luna's dad had been really hurt but none of them knew that he had lost his memories. Harry didn't know what to say.

"God Luna I-I didn't mean...I'm sorry." George stammered, horrified at his comment. Luna shook her head hurriedly, blonde strands falling into suddenly moist silver eyes, a shaky smile on her face.

"No, no it's fine! You didn't know. My Dad is going to be ok, his MediWizard says that in time he might gain some of his memories back. Everything is going to be fine." Harry frowned slightly, it sounded like she was trying harder to convince herself than them. She blinked quickly to dispel the moisture in her eyes. "I really have to go, visiting hours end at six."

Harry stood from the booth and stepped out. Ron and Hermione slid out after him so Luna could leave.

Harry gave her a small smile as she stepped out of the booth. "It was good to see you Luna, tell your father I said hello."

"It was good to see you too and I will tell my father, he's liked you since you gave us that interview." She grinned at him. She turned to the rest of the group. "Goodbye Fred, George, Cho, Hermione, Harry, and Ronald" she said nodding to each of them. "I'll see you all next week."

"Later Luna." Ron said, smiling warmly at her.

“Bye Luna.” Cho said. They all said their farewells and with a wave, bracelets jingling loudly, Luna walked away from the group and flooed to St.Mungo’s

“I really have to be going too.” Cho said softly, once Luna had disappeared through the flames. She seemed to be terribly uncomfortable around them and really Harry couldn’t say he was completely at ease around her either. She was quieter than she had been before, withdrawn. She reached under the table and grabbed a shoulder-bag; she slung it over her shoulder and stood up. Fred and George once again slid out of their seats so she could get out of the booth.

“My seat hasn’t even had a chance to get warm yet.” Fred whined as he slid off of the cracked leather seat. Cho rolled her eyes and smiled but it quickly faded. She stood awkwardly, fiddling with the strap of her black purse before clearing her throat and offering the remaining members of the group a small, sheepish smile.

“Well I guess I’ll see you all next week.” She said, walking backwards towards the floo. They all said their goodbyes and soon she was gone. As soon as she was gone Hermione swung her bag onto the table and promptly began digging through it. She pulled out a piece of parchment and a rather battered looking muggle ink pen.

“What’s that?” Ron asked, squinting at the pen.

“An ink pen. It’s like a quill but the ink stays inside of it.”

He flicked it with his finger and nodded. “Oh.”

Hermione took the pen from him and began writing something on the parchment. She finished quickly and then folded the parchment neatly. She handed it to Ron.

“This is where we live. Don’t read it here. If you guys ever want to visit us please don’t hesitate to floo right over, ok?” she said quickly.

“Sure but I thought you guys were waiting until after you found the correct spell?” Ron said, sliding the parchment into the pocket of his robes without reading it.

Hermione smiled warmly at him and the twins. "We trust you." She said simply.

Harry nodded. "I doubt you guys would tell anyone where we are."

"Well, unless someone paid us enough." George said, grinning. Hermione kicked him hard in the shin, his laughter cut off by a pained grunt. "Some people just can't take a joke." He grinned, rubbing his leg. He barely dodged the second kick.

"The only thing I ask of you guys is can you not show that to anyone. Not even your mum." Harry said seriously. The three Weasley's looked at him with serious eyes, the table suddenly growing quiet. The twins nodded in unison and then shrugged, leaning back into the cushioned seat.

"No problem mate, we'll keep it to ourselves." He said.

"Speaking of our mum," Fred said, checking the watch on his wrist. "We promised her we'd have little Ronny home before supper."

"That's right, Ronnykins has to eat his din-din soon, it's almost his bedtime!" George squealed, ruffling Ron's hair. Ron knocked his hand away, scowling at his snickering brothers.

"Shut up." He grumbled.

The twins, Harry and Hermione stood up and Ron slid out of the booth after them. Harry flicked his wrist and the silencing charm disintegrated. Hermione pulled Ron into a hug and he tensed, patting her on the back awkwardly.

"Bye Ron." She said. She pulled back and looked at him sternly. "You better visit us."

His ears turned red and he nodded. "I will."

Hermione squeezed him once again before releasing her hold on him and turning to the twins.

"I better see you two there too." She said as she hugged them both.

“Yes ma’am.” Said Fred.

“We wouldn’t miss seeing where the reclusive Potter family hides out from the public.” George teased.

Harry snorted before turning to Ron and clapping him on the back.

“See you later mate.” He said, grinning at his friend. Ron returned his grin.

“See you.”

He said goodbye to the twins and they watched as the three Weasley’s walked over to the floo and floored back home to the Burrow.

“Are we heading home?” Harry asked as Hermione pulled her bag back over her shoulder.

“I actually wanted to go into Diagon Alley.” She answered. “I want to see if Flourish & Blott’s has reopened yet.”

Harry nodded, a sudden idea entering his mind. “Alright. I have somewhere I need to go myself.”

The other patrons at the bar watched them as they began to walk away from the booth and to the door leading to Diagon’s entrance. The left the quiet pub and stepped into the cool courtyard that held the entrance to the alley.

“Hold on.” Harry said, stopping Hermione from opening the entrance. He opened his bag and dug through it quickly. He pulled out his robes and pulled them on over his muggle clothes. Hermione followed his lead, taking hers out of her bag and slipping them on. “Ok, lets go.”

Hermione stepped up to the wall and tapped the bricks with her wand. In seconds it dissolved into the entrance to Diagon Alley.

A/N: Yes I know, it took forever! Sorry about that, I ended up having to rewrite this chapter about five times because the computer I was using kept deleting it. I hope it was worth the wait! The next chapter will (hopefully) be up much, much sooner. Thank you all for your patience and reading and reviewing!

Chapter 28

Diagon Alley would never be the same. The street that was once vibrant and always full of people was now empty, the sidewalks desolate and bleak. A few witches and wizards walked the alley, their steps quick and eyes glued to the ground below, making eye-contact with no one. Aurors in their black and gold robes paced the alley with their wands out eyeing the few that shuffled up and down the alley. Harry was forcefully reminded of Knockturn Alley.

At least half of the buildings were back up and a few were being built right then. Wizards were standing around it with their wands pointed at a pile of thick, heavy looking stones. Red light came from their wands in a steady stream and the stones were slowly stacking and bonding together, forming into walls.

"This is..." Hermione shook her head, at a loss for words.

Harry swallowed and took her hand. "Come on."

They began making their way down the street. No one spoke to them but a few of the witches and wizards glanced their way with wide eyes, other avoided looking at them completely. The Auror's watched them warily as if they expected them to cause trouble. Even with the destruction around them, the eyes watching them, and the...bleakness of the alley the worst and most uncomfortable part of it all was the silence. The only noise in the alley was the sound of footsteps. Not even the sound of birds or the whistle of the wind disturbed the oppressive silence that blanketed the once bustling alley.

"This is kind of creepy." Harry muttered to Hermione from the side of his mouth.

He saw her lips twitch from the corner of his eye but her face otherwise stayed blank. "You think?"

They passed dark empty shops, making their way to where Flourish & Blott's hopefully was. Hermione stopped short, forcing Harry to stop quickly, stumbling slightly. He opened his mouth to ask her what that

was all about when he saw what she was staring at, the words faded from his mouth. Fortescue's. The windows and doors of the once cheery little ice cream parlor were boarded up, the tables were gone and the sign had fallen, it was lying broken on the ground.

"You don't think Fortescue was...in the attack?" Hermione whispered, staring at the broken sign.

"Nope but he probably is now." A voice said from behind them. They whirled around to see one of the Auror's standing behind them, twirling a wand in her fingers. She was dark skinned with wavy black hair pulled into a thick braid. Square silver framed glasses sat primly on her rather long nose. She looked to be just a few years out of her twenties. Something about her face was vaguely familiar, like he had seen it before but...different.

"What do you mean by that?" Harry asked her, eyeing her warily. He didn't trust anyone who worked for the ministry. The woman pushed her glasses up her nose and smiled a small, sad sort of smile.

"So witnesses say that during the attack some death eaters dragged him away. Ol' Florean Fortescue is probably rotting away somewhere by now." She shook her head. "Damn shame it is too."

"He was dragged away by death eaters?" Hermione asked, horrified.

The woman nodded. "Kicking and screaming witnesses say." She shook her head again before reaching a hand out to Harry. "I'm Auror Camille Johnson, I believe you two know my little sister?"

Harry looked at her in confusion, not making the connection but Hermione seemed to understand. Her eyes widened and she gasped slightly.

"Oh! You're Angelina's older sister aren't you? I knew you looked familiar." She grinned. Harry peered closer at the woman, she looked so much like Angelina he was shocked he didn't make the connection immediately. Her eyes were the same sharp dark brown and she had the same half smile Angelina did.

The woman, now revealed as Camille grinned, white teeth flashing. "People always say we look a lot alike. I didn't come over here to talk to you about her though. My commander," she jerked her head towards an older man a few feet away from them dressed in Auror's robes. He looked like he was trying very hard to seem like he wasn't watching them. "seems to think the two of you might cause some trouble." She rolled her eyes.

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Trouble? What does he think we're going to do?"

"Incite a riot?" she grinned, eyeing the near empty alley. "He's probably not going to be too happy about me talking to you but I can always tell him I was interrogating you." She winked. She turned to Harry, a serious expression crossing her face. "Anyway, I really just wanted to say to you that despite what the Prophet was saying I always believed you about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Angelina always spoke highly of you and I doubt Dumbledore would lie about something like that." Harry barely suppressed a scowl at the wizard's name. "And I definitely never believed a word that came out of Fudge's mouth. I just wanted you to know that."

"Thank you, it's nice to hear that everyone didn't believe I was a complete loon." Harry said, smiling.

She laughed. "I'm sure it is. Well I have to be getting back to my patrol." She reached out a hand to shake their's. "It was very nice to meet the both of you, you watch out for yourselves ok?"

"We will and it was very nice to meet you also." Hermione said as she shook the woman's hand.

She smiled one last time at them before turning and walking back over to her commander. Harry slipped his hand into her's and they continued down the alley, leaving the abandoned ice cream shop behind them.

"She seemed nice." Hermione said as they walked towards Flourish & Blott's, if it was still standing.

Harry nodded, eyeing a woman walking towards them, her eyes glued to the ground. "Yeah, I liked her."

The woman looked up as he spoke and with a squeak she quickly looked around as if looking for some way to avoid them before dodging around the couple, practically running. Harry and Hermione exchanged a bemused look, Hermione brows practically disappearing under her bangs.

"What was that all about?" Harry muttered, watching the woman disappear down the alley.

Hermione shrugged, a thoughtful expression on her face. "I have no idea, I had thought that people were over being afraid of you."

"I thought so too but I guess old habits die hard." He shook his head and tore his mind from the thought of the woman. "Come on, let's get going." The little bit of a good mood he had been feeling was quickly disappearing. First they're being watched by Aurors and now it seemed like people are back to thinking he's a manic? Now he just wanted to get this trip over with, get his daughter, and go home. Hermione sensed his mood and she nodded, then continued on their way to Flourish & Blott's.

A few minutes later they were in front of the old bookstore. Surprisingly it was still standing unlike many of the shops, a little worse for wear but still standing. The shop was open though they couldn't see anyone inside. It looked deserted. Hermione pushed open the door to the shop.

"Who's there?" a rough, quavering voice called when they stepped inside the dimly lit and dusty shop. It was vastly different from the usual bright, bustling shop that it used to be. Before they could answer there was the sound of shuffling feet and an old man neither had ever seen before came hobbling from around a corner, a cane clutched in one hand and his wand clutched in the other. He was a lot taller than Harry had first thought him to be, he was at least a foot taller than Harry. Thinning silver hair covered his head and a short bushy mustache was on his upper lip. He squinted at the couple with surprisingly fierce dark eyes and obvious wariness. "What are you doing here?" he practically growled.

"My name is Hermione and this is Harry." Hermione said kindly, smiling warmly at the old man. "We came here for well, books." She chuckled nervously, the smile never leaving her face. The old man's expression didn't change. He continued to eye them with distrust. He glared at them a little longer as if trying to decide if he would trust them before nodding stiffly and lowering his wand. His face relaxed and a small smile made its way onto his weathered face.

"Alexander Smith." He introduced himself, shaking their hands. "Sorry about that, I'm sure you can understand my caution." He said, nodding a little sadly.

They stepped farther into the shop, relaxing themselves. "We understand, you can never be too careful." Harry said to the old man, nodding slightly.

The old man nodded, turning to shuffle back to the counter. "Especially now." He sat down with difficulty on a stool behind the polished counter, they could practically hear his bones creaking. "I was a bit shocked to see you. No one has stepped foot in here since the attack. I've lost all of my employees." He shook his head. "No one has stepped into Diagon Alley. It's beginning to be just like the first war. Folks too afraid to leave their homes, no one trusting each other, attacks and people dying everyday." He sighed heavily, eyes sad. "I don't think the wizarding world could take it happening again." He shook his head and forced a smile back onto his face. "Enough of an old man's musings, enjoy your shopping."

"Thank you." Hermione said, offering Alexander a smile before tugging Harry farther into the store.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Harry murmured to her as she dragged him through the shelves, seeming to know exactly where she was heading.

She threw him a smile over her shoulder. "You could say that."

"You know we have a library at home stocked with nearly every book imaginable."

“Nearly is the key word there Harry.” She grinned. She finally stopped in front of a bookcase at the far end of the store, the charms section.

“I don’t think our library has a book on the spell we’ll need.” She explained as she browsed through the shelf. “But I saw a book here last time we came that could help, I know it’s over here somewhere.”

“Only you would remember something like that.” He teased her. She slapped him on the side, grinning.

“It’s what I do.” she took a book off of the shelf and began flipping through it. “This might take me a while Harry, you can look around a bit while I find the book.”

He shrugged. “Alright, I can see when I’m not wanted.” He leaned over and pecked her on the lips. “I’ll look around a bit.” He adjusted the strap on his bag. Suddenly he remembered something. “You know, on second though there’s something I have to go check on.”

Something in his voice must have worried Hermione because she grabbed his arm and looked him directly in the eyes. “What are you going to do Harry?” she ask suspiciously.

He gave her his best smile. “Nothing dangerous ‘Mi. I’ll be right back.” He kissed her again. “I promise.”

She eyed him for a second, searching his face before nodding once and allowing her own smile to cross her face. “Alright Harry but you better hurry back.”

“I will.” He turned from her, the smile dropped from his face and he quickly left the shop. As soon as he was out of sight of the bookstore he tugged the hood of his robes over his head. He muttered a quick spell, waving his hand in front of his face and it was cast into shadow, if someone tried to peer into the hood they still wouldn’t be able to discern his features. He reached into his bag and wrapped his fingers around the dagger still in its sheath, making sure it was still safely tucked away. Something about it had been bothering him, every time he touched it something just felt...wrong. He knew it wasn’t just an ordinary dagger. He kept it hidden deep in his and Hermione’s wardrobe, he couldn’t bring himself to get rid of it and for some

reason it made him uneasy to have it too far away from him. His grip on the dagger tightened. Today he was going to find out what the weapon really was.

If the few people in the alley had simply avoided looking at him earlier now they practically ran from him and he didn't blame them, he had no doubt he cut a rather fearsome sight shrouded in darkness the way he was. The Aurors were also paying more attention to him, watching much closer than they had before, their wands "discreetly" trained on him. Two of them were even following slowly behind him. He smiled grimly. He doubted they were going to follow him to where he was going. He continued down the alley, pretending he didn't notice the two Aurors following him, until the entrance to Knockturn Alley came into view. He picked up his pace and soon he was inside the alley, leaving the Aurors behind him.

Knockturn Alley was much the same as it was the last time he had been there, it didn't seem to have been affected at all by the attack that had nearly destroyed Diagon Alley. Also unlike Diagon Alley quite a few shady looking people were milling about the alley. No one tried to make eye contact with him or even looked at him at all but he could feel eyes on him. He unnecessarily pulled the hood farther over his face nervously. He hated coming here but the dagger was nagging at him and he knew this was probably the only place where he could get the real story on it. He straightened his back and with an air of complete confidence strode farther into the alley. He walked quickly through the dark and seedy alley until the now sickeningly familiar filthy window of Borgin and Burkes came into view. He strode into the store.

The same eerie gray light filled the dark and dusty shop. The only sound in the shop was the sound of his footsteps as he crossed over to the counter, ignoring the various disgusting and disturbing things bobbling around in jars around him. As soon as he reached the counter the small figure of Borgin Burke appeared from a door behind the counter, his thatch hair mussed and eyes glinting.

"Ahhh, welcome back mysterious stranger." he greeted Harry, grinning silkily. "I've been looking for you. I have some information I'm sure you'd like to hear."

“Information?” Harry asked coldly, suddenly feeling on edge.

“Yes. You see only a few short days after your last visit I found out something about a certain cup.” Harry felt his heart jump.

“What did you find out?” He feigned disinterest though inside he was waiting on bated breath for the man’s response.

Burke’s grin widened. “Well I couldn’t just tell you could I? That would be free information and I don’t give anything for free.”

Harry clenched his teeth but reached into the pocket of his robes and, thankfully, found a knut. He tossed it onto the counter. Burke snatched it up and slipped it into his pocket.

“It seems the cup was found buried behind Flourish & Blott’s and auctioned off by the Smith family when they were is...dire straights.”

Harry leaned forward, clutching the edge of the shop’s counter. “Who was it auctioned to?”

Burke tapped his chin. “You know, my memory is getting a bit foggy...”

Harry clutched the counter tighter to prevent himself from lunging over it and beating the information out of the man. He reached back into his pocket, silently praying that there was another knut there. Relief filled him when he felt the cold, heavy coin. He slid it over to the man who didn’t hesitate to snatch it up.

“It was sold to Isabel Greythorn, a mudblood.” He shook his head in disgust. “Can you imagine?”

Harry didn’t say anything but he was sure the man could feel him glaring from under his hood.

“Anyway, that was about fifteen years ago.”

“Do you know where I can find this woman?”

"I don't know, I know so much information it is so easy for me to forg-" before the man could dare ask for more money Harry grabbed the front of his robes and jerked him forward until their noses were nearly touching.

"Tell me now." Harry hissed. Burke had paled considerably and sweat was dripping down his face.

"Ok, ok!" he gasped. Harry released him and he stumbled backwards, rubbing his neck. He scowled at Harry.

"She lives in Little Whinging, Surrey."

To say Harry was shocked was the understatement of the century. This woman lived in the one place he had sworn he would never step foot in again.

He fought hard to keep the shock from his voice. "Do you have her exact address?"

"6 Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, England." He grumbled reluctantly.

Harry closed his eyes briefly and cursed whatever deity was deciding to screw him over this time.

"Anything else?" he asked. The shop owner shook his head, still glowering.

"No, that's all I have. Did you come into my shop for a reason?" he snapped. He had dropped all pretences of being nice by now.

Harry pushed the thoughts of Privet Drive and the Dursley's to the back of his mind and straightened to his full height, crossing his arms over his chest. "I have a certain...item and I need you to discern it's use for me." He said coldly, no emotion in his voice.

Burke grinned and his blindingly white teeth flashed with a predatory gleam. "I'm sure I can be of service."

Harry reached into his bag, never taking his eyes off of the man across from him, and carefully pulled out the dagger. He placed it on top of the counter. Burke swooped down on it, snatching up the weapon and turning it over in his hands. He unsheathed it and his eyes widened, sparkling with some unholy light.

"This..." he practically purred, his eyes glued to the gleaming weapon. "Is a dagger."

Harry snorted. "Really? I hadn't noticed." He drawled, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Burke scowled darkly at him, his lip almost curling in contempt. "It's not just any dagger *sir*. This" he ran his fingers reverently over the dagger. "is a Tainted Dagger."

"Tainted Dagger?"

"Yes. As I'm sure you know nearly every pureblood family was given a set of Sacred Daggers after the war of 'Good and Evil'," he sneered at this "but some wizards used them in a way the makes hadn't intended. Some wizards understood that you could get even more power from the daggers if you 'tainted' them."

Harry began to feel an uncomfortable stirring in his stomach and the hairs on his neck began to stand up. "And how did these wizards 'taint' them?"

Burke grinned a slow, twisted grin.

"They were soaked in the blood of innocents."

Bile rose at the back of Harry's throat and his heart clenched. The blood of innocents? That could only mean...he clenched his fists so tightly he could feel his nails digging into the skin on his palms. Someone had used that dagger to kill *children*! The very thought of it made him feel physically ill and absolutely *furious*! And this horrible little man was standing in front of him grinning about it! He had to clench both his fists to keep himself from cursing Burke right on the spot.

“Some say that when the daggers were enhanced this way it gave them nearly as much power as the Weapon.” Burke continued. “A great many powerful wizards rose with the help of these blades. They have been lost for many years, they had completely disappeared. No one has seen one for over two hundred years. Just think of the power you could have with a weapon like this.” His grip tightened on the dagger and he looked at Harry with burning eyes. Harry knew what he was planning before he made a move. Burke’s hand had barely flicked towards his wand before it flew away from him, the dagger flew back into Harry’s hand and the small man was thrown backwards. He hit a shelf directly behind him before falling to the ground. The jars that had been on the shelf fell around him one of them breaking on top of his head, thick green liquid dripped down the slumped, now unconscious man’s bloodied face. Harry slipped the dagger into his robe pocket and with a pounding heart quickly strode out of the shop.

“What the hell just happened?” he thought frantically. Borgin Burke had just tried to attack him for the dagger. What kind of power could the thing have that it would drive the man to attack him like that? He reached into his pocket and clenched the weapon tightly in his fist. A part of him screamed for him to get rid of it, to just throw it away somewhere but the other part...he couldn’t get rid of it, he had to figure out what kind of power it could wield. He couldn’t let it fall into the wrong hands and...for all he knew this could help him finally defeat Voldemort.

He got out of Knockturn Alley as fast as he could, practically running to the dark entrance. As soon as he was back in Diagon he headed towards Flourish & Blott’s, he wanted to get Hermione and get out of there as soon as possible. When no one was looking he dispelled the charm on his hood and tugged it off. His heart was still pounding as he fairly jogged to the bookstore a few feet away from him and he couldn’t stop himself from checking over his shoulder every few seconds to make sure no one was following him. He was so focused on making sure that he wasn’t being followed that he didn’t notice the small woman in front of him until she called his name. He stopped short.

“Mr. Potter!” she yelled with excitement, a wide grin on her pixie-like face. Harry tensed before forcing a polite smile on his face. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to an “adoring” fan.

The woman was fairly small, she barely reached his chin. She had raven black hair cut into a bob that framed her pale face. Large hazel eyes stood out from behind black framed square glasses. She had a small upturned nose and freckles were sprinkled over the bridge of it. Stacks of parchment were clutched in her arms and a heavy bag was slung over her shoulder, more rolls of parchment and quills peeked out of the pockets of it. A quill was even tucked behind one small ear.

“Hello.” He muttered, trying to step around her. She stepped sideways into his path he once again stopped, irritation mounting.

“I know you don’t know me and I’m sorry if I’m bothering you but you see I’ve been waiting *ages* to talk to you and get your side of the story you know?” she babbled, talking so fast he could barely understand a word. He just looked at her with wide, confused eyes. She took a deep breath and her face flared a bright red. “I’m sorry you have no idea who I am and I’m probably making no sense at all and I’m probably just annoying the life out of you but I’ve been trying to contact you for the past month or so but I, like everyone else I bet, couldn’t get a hold of you! Anyway my name is Belinda.” She stuck out her hand and Harry reluctantly shook her hand. “Belinda Foster reporter for the Daily Prophet.”

Harry barely resisted the urge to wrench his hand from her grasp. He’s had way too many back experiences with Daily Prophet reporters.

“Nice to meet you.” He said, a bit more coldly than he had intended. He once again stepped around her and he began striding towards Flourish & Blott’s in the distance. Belinda stood shocked for a second before chasing after him, almost having to run to catch up with his long legs.

“Mr. Potter! I know that the Daily Prophet has never been very...kind to you but I really want to know your side of the story.” She said quickly as she caught up to him. “I really want to get to the truth and you and Dumbledore are the only one’s who seemed to have tried to

tell it. I want the wizarding world to know what is *really* happening and not just what the ministry has been telling them.”

Harry stopped and turned to her sharply, she almost collided with his chest but she caught herself quickly. She looked up at him with wide eyes and Harry could actually see a touch of fear. He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He was already walking on an edge of a knife since his little encounter with Burke and this woman was irritating his already frayed nerves.

“What exactly is it that you want from me?” he asked.

She took a deep shaky breath and drew up to her rather unimpressive height. She looked him directly in the eye. “I want to interview you.”

Harry pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes briefly. He really didn’t need this right now. “Look Ms. Foster I appreciate the fact that you want to tell the truth and I wish you the best of luck in that but I don’t do interviews.” He turned to walk away again but Belinda cut him off, stopping him in his tracks.

“Yes you do! I remember you did an interview in the Quibbler not even a year ago.” She blushed again. “I’ve read it many, many times. You spoke the truth then Mr. Potter and I think the wizarding world deserves to hear it again, they deserve to know what’s really going on.”

“And you can tell them what really going on, without me.” Harry said.

She shook her head. “No, it would mean so much more if it comes from you. You’re their savior remember?” she grinned. The smile slipped off her face, replaced by an earnest look. “The wizarding world is living with their heads in the sand while He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is gathering forces and I’m sure planning more attacks. A war is coming and people have to be warned while there is still time to protect ourselves.”

Harry ran an agitated hand through his hair. He agreed with her, he knew she was right but...he just really didn’t need this right now. “Look,” he sighed “I’ll think about it ok?” she gasped happily and a

wide grin spread across her face. She opened her mouth to thank him but he held up a hand. "I don't know for sure when I'll have the time but I'll owl you when I can."

She nodded, her smile faltering. She obviously didn't think he was ever going to owl her. "Ok, I understand and thank you for your time Mr. Potter."

He offered her as much of a genuine smile as he could, feeling a bit bad. "You can call me Harry and I *will* owl you."

She brightened a bit. "Thank you." She shuffled the rolls of parchment in her arms. "Well I really should be getting back to the Prophet. It was very nice to me you Mr-Harry."

He nodded to her once before turning away and heading towards Flourish & Blott's. The shop was still as dim and empty as it was when he left, it felt like it had been hours ago. He acknowledged Mr. Smith with a small smile before heading down the aisle he had left Hermione on. She of course wasn't still there. Swallowing down a sigh he began quickly searching through the shelves for his fiancé.

He found her in the historical section standing on a wooden stool, reaching for a book on the very top of the shelf. A stack of books were on the floor by the stool.

"Mi." He called softly. She started. He could see her hand twitch as if she had been prepared to curse him on the spot. She turned and relaxed when she saw it was only him, one hand going to her chest and a warm smile gracing her features.

"Harry! You scared me, what did I tell you about sneaking-" the smile suddenly dropped from her face and her eyes grew sharp. "What happened?" she asked, stepping down from the stool. "What's wrong?"

He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes, she could always read him like a book. He licked his lips and shook his head. "I'll tell you as soon as we get out of her." He said quickly. "We have to go."

She pressed her lips together tightly and her eyebrows drew into a worried line. She nodded tersely and bent down to gather the books, placing the book she had retrieved from the shelf on top of them.

“Do you need any help?” he asked her, gesturing towards the rather impressive stack of books in her arms.

“No, I’ve got it. Did you get into some sort of trouble Harry?” she asked as they navigated their way back to the counter where Mr. Smith still sat.

“You could say that.” He muttered, avoiding her eyes. She sighed heavily.

“I leave you alone for a few minutes and you get yourself into trouble.”

He forced a smile onto his face.

“I don’t get into trouble, it gets into me.”

She snorted. “You can say that again.”

He chose to ignore her comment. They made their way to the counter fairly quickly and soon the older man was tallying up the books. He told them the price and before he could ask him for it Harry handed him his card. He tapped his fingers on the counter while he waited for the man to wave his wand over it. He really, *really* wanted to get back home as soon as possible.

“Thank you for...shopping.” The man had barely gotten the words out of his mouth before Harry had taken back his card, grabbed the shopping bag and began leading Hermione out of the shop.

“Thank you!” Hermione called to him over her shoulder as the door swung close behind them.

“What happened, Harry?” she asked as they strode back towards the Leaky Cauldron. He knew there was no way she was going to let this go until they got back home.

"I went to Knockturn Alley." He stated. The hand that was gripping his squeezed so hard he was sure she cut off his circulation.

"You. Went. *Where?*" she hissed. Even without looking at her he knew she was glaring daggers at him.

"I know, I shouldn't have gone but there was something I needed to check up on. I can't talk about it right now Hermione but I promise you as soon as we're back home I'll tell you the entire story."

She sighed but nodded, loosening her death grip on his hand. He nearly sighed with relief.

It didn't take them long to reach the entrance to the alley and they were soon standing in the chilly little courtyard. The quickly stripped of their robes and stored them back in their bags before once again linking hands and stepping back into the cauldron.

There were even less people there now than there had been when they arrived. Only a couple of people were still in the pub on opposite sides of the room both hunched over mugs. Harry and Hermione spared Tom a nod of farewell before crossing the pub and leaving through the door. It was almost a relief to be back in the muggle world but Harry wouldn't feel completely at ease until they were all back home. Hermione pulled the helmets from the compartment and stored away the shopping bag before handing one to him and pulling her own on. He swung onto the gleaming bike and Hermione climbed easily on after him. The bike roared to life and Harry pulled out and zoomed down the road.

"Did you find the book you were looking for?" Harry asked through the helmet as they sped to Grimmauld. He felt Hermione jump a bit from behind him. It was always a bit disconcerting to speak through the helmets, it was like someone speaking directly into your ear.

"Yes I found it and quite a few other interesting ones we didn't have in the library." She answered him. "I was trying to find something that could help us with the search for the horcruxes."

"Did you?"

"I think so but...I'm not too sure." She sighed. "There is surprisingly little information on the founders and what is there is only really stories and guesses. I didn't get to really read through the few I got but most of them seem like just stories." She sighed again. "I just hope they can help."

"Me too." Harry murmured. His thoughts drifted toward the Dursley's and he clenched his teeth. He had never wanted to be anywhere near them again and now it looks like he would have no choice.

In less than ten minutes they were pulling into the alley near Grimmauld Place. They dismounted and put away the helmets. Hermione pulled the shopping bags out of the compartment, shrunk them and slipped it into her bag. Harry shrunk the bike and put it away. They left the alley and began walking towards Grimmauld. As they walked Harry caught Hermione throwing glances at him every few seconds. He knew she was worrying about him and wondering what had happened in Knockturn Alley but truthfully he didn't want to tell her. He felt guilty, like he had done something really wrong and he knew that once he told Hermione the story behind the dagger she would want him to be rid of it but he couldn't do that. It had a purpose for him, he *knew* it.

"I'll tell you as soon as we get home." He said quietly as he again caught her looking at him with that too familiar worried look in her warm eyes.

"I'm holding you to that Harry." She said just as softly. They continued walking to Grimmauld in silence. Harry knocked on the door and after a few minutes Remus answered.

"Hello you two." He greeted them, his usual warm smile on his face.

"Hello Remus, how was Cattie? She didn't tire you guys out too much did she?" Hermione asked, smiling as they stepped into the house.

"She was great." He grinned. "She's upstairs with Tonks and Draco right now." He closed the door. "How was your shopping?"

"It was...ok." Harry answered him, shaking his head. Remus raised an eyebrow but didn't comment.

“Come on, they’re up in the nursery.” He led the couple up stairs and to the nursery at the far end of the hallway.

They had finished the room in the few hours Harry and Hermione had been gone. The crib was set under one of the large windows at the back of the room. Soft pale blue blankets and blue and white striped pillows were now in the crib and a mobile with floating clouds and birds was over the crib. A padded blue and dark wood rocking chair was tucked into a cozy little corner on the other side of the room, bookcases were built into the wall over it and children’s books and stuffed toys were placed in them. The walls were fully painted now and on one of them was a large moving painting of a sunny forest where a stag, a large black dog, and a wolf romped happily. “*The Marauders*.” Harry thought with a small smile. In the middle of the floor was a large round blue and white striped rug where Tonks, Draco, and Cattie sat. Cattie was lying on her stomach giggling about something Tonks was telling her.

“Guess who’s here.” Remus said as they stepped into the room. Cattie’s head jerked around at the sound of her voice and she grinned widely, hopping up from the floor. Malfoy spared them a terse nod of acknowledgement and Harry returned it.

“Mum!” she skipped over to them and threw her arms around Hermione’s waist. She released her and quickly wrapped her arms around her Daddy. He ruffled her hair and grinned down at her, suddenly feeling some much better.

“Hey Kitty-Cat, have a good time?”

She nodded. “Yep. We finished the baby’s nursery, see?” she gestured around the room.

Hermione’s lips twitched. “I see, it looks amazing. It really does look great in here you guys.”

“Thanks.” Tonks said, patting her very round stomach. “I think he’s going to like it.”

“I bet he will.” Harry grinned.

Hermione started searching through her bag. "We picked up something for the baby while we were out." She pulled out the shrunken shopping bag and her wand for show. She placed the tiny bag on the floor and tapped it with her wand. In seconds it returned to its original size. With a wide smile she handed it to Tonks. Tonks raised her eyebrows but quickly dug into the bag. She pulled out the little fuzzy eared hat and squealed with delight.

"How adorable!" she gushed, rubbing it gently. "Look Remus. Isn't it cute?"

He took it from her and nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. "It's very cute."

Tonks rolled her eyes at him and dug back into the shopping bag. Cattie sat back down on the rug and peered into the bag. Tonks pulled out the matching jacket, a package of little striped socks and the bear, squealing and giggling all the while.

"What's this?" Malfoy asked, poking the soft brown bear.

"It's called a 'Sounds of the Womb' bear. When you turn the knob it makes the sound of the womb, it helps sooth the baby for the first few months after birth."

With a dubious expression Malfoy turned the knob on the back of the bear. He blinked down at the bear when the room filled with the soft, warm sound.

"I like that, it's soothing." Tonks said once Malfoy had turned the bear off.

Remus nodded and took the bear from Draco. "We'll probably need it." He said and put it in the crib. Tonks reached back into the bottom of the bag and pulled out a stuffed toy. It was a small stuffed wolf. It was a pale yellow and the fur was silky soft. Its paws and its nose were a bright white.

"Thank you." Remus said softly, running his fingers over the soft fur.

"You're welcome, we thought it'd fit." Harry said, returning the smile. Remus grinned and Tonks chuckled.

"It does." She reached back into the bag and pulled out the very last things. "Candy!" she held up a handful of suckers they had picked up from the baby store. They were red lollypops shaped like pacifiers.

"See, told you we'd bring you candy."

They spent a few more minutes with the family before deciding to head home. It was late evening and Cattie would soon have to be getting to bed. Remus once again walked them to the door, Tonks was feeling a bit worn and had elected to stay in the nursery with Draco.

"Thank you for keeping an eye on Cattie, Remus." Hermione thanked the man as they stood in front of the fireplace, ready to floo home.

"It was no problem, we love having her here." He ruffled the little girl's dark curls and she giggled, dodging away from his hand. "Thanks for bringing those things for the baby."

"It was our pleasure, well more Hermione's than mine. I think she was enjoying the shopping a bit too much." Harry teased.

"He enjoyed it too." She hugged Remus. "We'll see you later."

Remus hugged her back before releasing her and pulling Harry into a short hug. "Ok, remember you three are always welcome to visit."

"We know." Harry reached up and grabbed a handful of floo powder. "Thank you again."

Remus waved a dismissive hand. "I told you, it's now problem." He kneeled down and hugged Catherine.

"Bye Cattie."

She hugged him tight around the neck. "Bye Uncle Moony." She let go of the older man and Harry scooped her into his arms.

“Ready?”

She nodded. “Ready.”

He threw the handful of floo powder into the fire and it flared the familiar bright green. With a deep breath he stepped inside, Cattie tucked her face into the nape of his neck.

“Potter Family Cottage!”

After a dizzying, sickening ride he and Cattie stumbled into the family room. He was just placing her on the ground when Hermione stepped out of the fireplace. Harry sighed heavily and plopped down on the cushy couch, it felt so good to be home. Now all he had to worry about was keeping Hermione from killing him when he told her why he’d been in Knockturn Alley and that he still had the dagger.

“I think the baby’s going to be here really, really soon.” Cattie said, climbing up next to Harry.

Hermione sat down next to them. “Yes he will, in at least two months.”

Cattie shook her head. “No, sooner than that.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and looked down at her curiously.

“How do you know?”

She shrugged. “I just do.”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a look. Cattie yawned and snuggled closer to Harry’s side.

“Remus and Tonks tired you out, huh?” Hermione said, rubbing a hand on her back. “Why don’t you go on up stairs and take your bath and get ready for bed.”

Cattie yawned again and nodded. She slipped off of the couch and began heading out of the room. Harry resisted the urge to make her stay, he knew as soon as the little girl was gone Hermione was going

to grill him for answers. He wasn't sure if he wanted to give her those answers just yet. He didn't have to wait long. As soon as Cattie was out of earshot and up the stairs Hermione turned to him and folded her hands in her lap, eyes sharp.

"Now, tell me what happened."

He jumped right into it, he was just going to get the worst part over with. "I went to Knockturn Alley to find some information on a certain item-

"What item?" he shifted uncomfortably and hesitantly reached into his robe pocket and pulled out the dark dagger.

Hermione eyed the weapon warily, not reaching out to touch it.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked slowly.

"Do you remember when I told you about the dagger I got off of Mundungus?" when she nodded he continued. "Well this is it. There was just something about it, something...off. It was nagging at me and I went to Knockturn Alley to see if I could find out anything about it."

She leaned forward. "Did you?" He looked away from her and sighed before launching into the entire story.

"...and then he attacked me."

"What?!" Hermione exclaimed, jumping over her feet. One of her hands flew to her head and she paced in front of Harry who was still seated on the couch. "How'd you get away?" she asked through clenched teeth.

Harry waved a hand dismissively, a smile dancing on his lips. "I knocked him out. I wasn't that big of a deal."

She snorted. "Yes of course, no big deal! You find out you have a *cursed* dagger that you, stupidly might I add, decide to keep! Then to top it all off you're attacked by a crazy, power hungry shop owner! You're completely right Harry, its *no big deal* at all!"

The smile slipped from his face. "Look 'Mi, I know it wasn't the smartest thing to do but I didn't get hurt, no one even saw who I was."

She sighed heavily and ran a hand over her face in exasperation before dropping back down onto the couch.

"That's not what I'm worried about Harry. What gets me is that you kept the dagger! This *thing* is obviously very dark Harry, it's obviously dangerous and you need to get rid of it. You need to get it out of this house and as far away from us as possible."

"But it could help us Hermione! If it really has as much power as Burke says it does...it could help me get rid of Voldermont for good."

"You can't fight fire with fire. That dagger is a dark weapon, who knows what will happen if you use it." She placed a hand on his arm. "Who knows what could happen to you. These kinds of things can taint you Harry. Some magics are truly dark and they can ruin you. You have to get rid of it."

He looked down at her hand on his arm and nodded, never looking up at her. "Ok, I'll get rid of it." He could feel her sigh with relief.

"Good. Thank you Harry."

He forced himself to look up and smile. He nodded again. She hugged him and an almost crushing guilt filled him. He knew he couldn't just get rid of it. He was going to keep it. Only for a little while of course, just until he knew for sure if it could help him destroy Voldermont.

"I-I found out something else at Burke's." he said, changing the subject.

"What?"

"Where Hufflepuff's cup is."

Hermione gasped. "What?! Where is it?!"

“Burke said that about fifteen years ago the Smith’s found it buried next to Flourish & Blott’s. They auctioned it and it was sold to a muggleborn witch named Isabel Graythorn. He even gave me her address.”

She shook her head in amazement. “That’s great! Did you write it down?”

“I didn’t have to.” He sighed. “I know it well enough.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, furrowing her eyebrows.

“Apparently she lives on Privet Drive. Only two houses down from the Dursley’s.”

“Oh my god. Harry...I can go alone.”

He snorted. “There is no way I’m going to let you go by yourself, who knows what could be waiting there.”

“We can avoid the Dursley’s, there’s no reason we’ll end up running into them.”

“But with my luck we will.” He sighed. “It’s ok. This is more important than whatever the Dursley’s can say to me. We’ll go together.”

Hermione nodded. “We can go sometime after the DA meeting.”

He sighed again. “Sounds like a plan.”

Hermione stood up from the couch and stretched, the trouble expression still on her face.

“I’m going to go and take a bath, meet you back down here for dinner?”

“Yeah. I’ll be here.”

She turned and left the room. As soon as she was gone he dropped his head into his hands. He hated lying to Hermione but he couldn’t just get rid of the dagger. Burke did say it had been one of the Sacred

Daggers, maybe he'd be able to reverse the dark spell on it and still keep it's powe-

"Daddy!" his thoughts were cut short by a terrified scream. Before he had even realized what he was doing he had jumped off the couch and sprinted up the stairs. He raced down the hallway and too Cattie's bedroom. The scream had come from the bathroom and before he reached it Cattie came running out, in her pajamas and her hair still damp and collided with his chest.

"Cattie! What's wrong? What happened?" he asked her frantically, getting to his knees and grabbing her shoulders. She sobbed something he couldn't quite make out because she had both her hands over her mouth, tears were falling fast down her cheeks. "Cattie, luv calm down and tell me what's wrong." He gently pried her hands from her face.

"My-my tooth!" she sobbed.

"What's wrong with your tooth?"

She opened her mouth and with her finger wiggled one of her top teeth. "My teeth are falling out!"

Harry had to press his lips together to keep from laughing. Cattie obviously saw the amusement sparkling in his eyes because she glared at him through her tears.

"It's not funny!" her bottom lip trembled.

"Of course it's not hun, I'm sorry." He forced down the laugh that was threatening to bubble to the surface. "You're just losing your small teeth so bigger ones can grow."

"Oh." She blushed, brushing the wetness from her cheeks. "I knew that."

He laughed then and leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Come one, its almost time for supper."

Cattie sniffled and nodded, grabbing his hand. "Where's Mum?" she asked as they walked out of her bedroom.

"She's taking a bath, she'll meet us downstairs after she's done."

They walked slowly down the hallway, Cattie swinging their clasped hands. They walked to the dining room and sat at the table. Two plates of steaming chicken with slices of lemon on top, brown rice, and steamed vegetables appeared in front of them. Tall cold glasses of pumpkin juice appeared next to them.

"Daddy?" she asked, spearing a carrot and popping it into his mouth.

"Yes, luv?" he asked, cutting his chicken into pieces with his fork.

"Do you think everything tastes the same to everybody?"

He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "What?" his fork stopped halfway to his mouth.

She chewed thoughtfully. "Well I know that carrots taste like carrots to me but what if it tastes like corn to someone else but they didn't know it tastes like corn because corn tastes like carrots to them and they didn't know the difference so I guess that to them it *does* taste like carrots..."

He stared in silence at the little girl still chewing her carrots and he suddenly burst into laughter. Cattie just watched him with raised brows, still eating her carrots. He was still laughing when Hermione walked into the room. She was dressed in red pajamas and her hair was pulled into a messy bun.

"Ok, what happened?" she asked, sliding into a chair next to Cattie.

The little girl shrugged. "Daddy's weird."

Harry snorted and shook his head. "I guess that's where you get it from."

Cattie stuck her tongue out at him, giggling.

Hermione shook her head at the both of them. "Yes, you're both weird."

Laughing, they continued their supper.

About an hour or more later Cattie was tucked in her bed and Harry and Hermione were in their own bedroom. Hermione was sitting on their bed, the books she had purchased that day spread around her. Harry was lounging in one of the chairs in front of their fireplace, his feet propped up on the table and his guitar on his lap. He was strumming the chords gently, soft music filled the room. It was the same song he had been writing for the past few weeks. He closed his eyes and allowed the music to flow through him.

"What are you playing?" Hermione asked, breaking him from the trance he had fallen into.

He smiled sheepishly, his face coloring slightly. "Just a song I wrote...for you." He muttered, looking back down at the guitar. Hermione put down the book she was holding and smiled brightly.

"Really? You wrote something for me?" she asked, her voice soft.

He shrugged. "Of course."

Hermione pushed a book off of her lap and climbed out of their large bed. She padded across the room and over to the chair across from Harry. Her eyes were intently focused on him, the firelight reflected in the golden brown.

"Play it for me." She asked softly.

He met her eyes and the nervous, embarrassment he had been feeling slipped away. He put his fingers back to the chords and began playing. The soft music once again filled the room and he took a breath before opening his mouth and beginning to sing.

Clouds above go sailing by

*I found my meaning in this life
Clear white is flying in my eyes,
underneath a blue, blue sky
The waves come rolling in with the tide.
I've been away too long
And every day I missed you more.
You look like you did before,
only prettier.
Every day I love you more.
All the people rushing by, by, by
Looking for meaning in this life
So used up, and blinded by lies,
they're underneath the blue, blue sky
The way they seldom seem to smile,
I don't know why.
'Cause I've been away too long
and every day I missed you more.
You look like you did before,
only prettier
Every day I love you more
I love you more,*

everyday I love you more,

and more

Cause I've been away too long

And every day I missed you more.

You look like you did before,

only prettier.

And every day I missed you more,

and more and more and more and more.

I've been away too long

And every day I missed you more.

Oh you look like you did before,

only prettier

Everyday I love you more.

I love you more.

Everyday I love you more

"Harry." Hermione said after his words had faded. He continued strumming even after he stopped singing; he looked up at her and smiled almost shyly.

"Did you like it?" he asked, just ask quietly.

She seemed at a loss for words. Her eyes were damp and her bottom lip trembled but she was smiling. "I...I-I loved it." She said, completely genuine. "It was *perfect*." She stood up and walked over to his chair. She took the guitar from his hands and laid it gently on the coffee table. She took his face in her hands and gently leaned forward and kissed him. Her lips pressed firmly against his. He reached up gently

grabbed her waist, pulling her closer to him until she was straddling his lap. Her soft fingers threaded through his hair and she deepened the kiss. The kiss was soft and sweet, loving and gentle. Hermione reluctantly pulled back, their foreheads leaning together and noses brushing.

"Thank you." She whispered, their lips brushed together.

He smiled against her lips. "You're very welcome." He reached up and brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face. "It's true you know. Every single day I love you more and more."

He could see her eyes begin to sparkle with wetness again. "I feel the same Harry. Everyday you amaze me more and more. Everyday you become a stronger man, a better father, and your capacity to love so fiercely astounds me. To me you're perfect in every way." She kissed him again. "Perfect for me."

He didn't know what to say so he did the only thing he could. He pulled her even closer to him and kissed her with every bit of his feeling, every bit of his love. When they finally pulled back they were both gasping for air and they were both grinning. Hermione climbed off of his lap and pulled him up after her.

"Come on, lets get some sleep." She said, pulling him towards their bed.

He pouted. "Sleep?"

"Yes Harry, sleep." She giggled, continuing to pull him towards the bed. She released his hand and took the books off of the bed, stacking them on the floor. She climbed onto the bed and slipped under the covers, she turned and looked at him expectantly. He stood next to his side of the bed with his arms crossed, the pout still on his face. She sighed heavily. "Get into bed Harry."

He pretended to sigh unhappily though a smile danced in his eyes. He climbed into the bed after her and slipped under the blankets himself. Hermione curled up as close to him as she could, laying her head on his chest.

“Nox.” He said softly and the fireplace dimmed.

“Thank you for my song Harry.” Hermione whispered after a few seconds of comfortable silence. He turned his head and kissed her forehead.

“You’re welcome, luv.”

The week passed quickly and soon it was the day of their first DA meeting. Hermione had found the correct security spell in the charms book she purchased from Flourish & Blott’s and the news had quickly spread to the rest of the DA members.

It was called the *Semper Celo*. The caster of the *Semper Celo* would tap the head of the person they wished to cast the spell on and it would force the person to keep a secret, no matter what. It would make it completely impossible for the person to tell the secret; they wouldn’t be able to speak it, write it down, anything at all. Not even a *Legilimens* could uncover the secret. No matter how hard they tried the secret cannot be told. It wasn’t used widely because most believed it too close to the *Imperio* and therefore dangerous.

The members of the DA that were willing to join once again were going to congregate and the Burrow where either Harry or Hermione would go and cast the spell on them. Only one could go because neither wanted to leave Cattie at home without one of them there. They couldn’t bring her to Remus and Tonk’s because they were at St. Mungo’s for another checkup on the baby and they definitely weren’t going to leave her alone with Malfoy. No matter how much he has changed he hadn’t changed nearly enough for them to even consider leaving her with him unattended. So it left them with quite a problem. Hermione believe she should be the one to go and cast the spell because she was the one who has found it, researched it, and read about it over and over. Harry of course believed he should be the one to go simply because he didn’t like the idea of her going alone.

“Harry come one! I’m just going to the Burrow, nothing is going to happen!” Hermione exclaimed, clearly exasperated with him. She

finished pulling on her light brown sweater and deftly pulled her hair into a ponytail.

Harry sighed and leaned back against the fireplace in the family room, crossing his arms over his chest. "What if you need help with the spell?" he was running out of reasons to make her let him go instead and truthfully he didn't think she would listen even if he managed to come up with a really good one.

She rolled her eyes. "I won't."

He sighed again, now completely out of reasons. He knew he was pouting but why couldn't she just let him go instead? He didn't like having her away from him, especially when he wouldn't know for sure if she would be safe.

"Harry." She said smiling. "I'll be fine. It'll only take a little while and then I'll be back." She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek.

"I know." He grumbled. He allowed a small smile to make its way onto his face. "Just be careful."

"I will."

He leaned down and kissed her.

"Love you."

"Love you too." She grabbed a handful of floo powder and threw it into the flames. When they flared green she stepped inside. "**The Burrow!**" and she was gone in a swirl of green flame.

"This is going to be fun." Harry said to the now empty room. With a sigh he turned and headed out of the room.

A/N: New chapter *finally* done! I had to add Cattie's little tooth freak out in there, I remember doing the exact same thing when my first tooth came loose. I finally put the guitar back in which

will make some of you happy. The song is Love You More by Racoon.

The next chapter will be up much sooner than the last two...hopefully. It's terribly hard to get them done without my computer but I'll try to start updating much sooner. I hope this chapter was interesting enough for the wait! Thank you all for your wonderful reviews, you patience, and for reading!

Chapter 29

Harry left the room and went to make his way up the staircase but stopped short when he saw Cattie sitting on them. She was sitting on one of the steps, a thick book open on her lap. It was an hour or so before her bedtime so she was already dressed in her pajamas, pink and white silky shirt and pants, Hermione had carefully braided her wild hair before she had left. Trouble was stretched out on the banister cleaning his paws contently.

"What are you reading?" Harry asked, leaning against the banister. Trouble trotted over to him and began rubbing his soft head against Harry's arm. He began scratching the animal behind its ears, much to his delight.

The little girl looked up from her book and smiled, the hole where her front tooth once was clearly visible. "Conjuring For Beginners." With the loss of her tooth she had developed a slight lisp which annoyed her no end. Harry looked down at her with narrowed eyes and she rolled her own. "I promise not to try anything unless you or Mum are there."

"You better not." He said, nudging her teasingly. She giggled.

"Why are these people coming Daddy?" she asked, once her giggles had died down.

"Well," Harry began, sitting down on the step below her. "We're having a meeting. They want to learn something that your mother and I are going to teach them."

"Are these the same people you had to meet before?"

He nodded. She frowned thoughtfully.

"Can I watch?"

"I'm sorry, luv but no."

She sighed heavily. "I knew you were going to say no." she grumbled.

"Then why did you ask?"

"I had to try." She shrugged. He laughed and leaned to kiss her on the forehead. He stood up from his seat on the stair. He had to get ready.

"Tell me when your mum comes back, ok?"

The little girl nodded and went back to her book. Shaking his head he continued his trek upstairs, stepping around Cattie.

He walked down the hallway and into his and Hermione's bedroom. He was already dressed and prepared for the DA to come but there were still a few things he had to take care of before Hermione returned. He grabbed a few carefully stacked books from their bed and tucked them under one arm. He then walked over to the far end of the bedroom to the shelf where his guitar was held. He reached up and took it off of the shelf before laying it on the coffee table, placing the stack of books next to it. With careful hands he undid the clasps and opened the case. The guitar lay serenely in its velvet lined bed but instead of reaching in and taking it out he reached under the neck and pulled out the dagger. He had hidden it there because he knew it was the one place Hermione would never look for it; she wasn't looking for it anyway, she believed he had already gotten rid of it or destroyed it. Lying to her was tearing him apart but he just couldn't get rid of it so easily, it was an extremely powerful weapon and it could help in tremendous ways.

He hadn't had the chance to hide it anywhere else because Hermione was rarely away from him, they were almost always together. Now would be the only time he would be able to put it in a completely safe place.

"Molby!" he called. There was a pop then the older elf appeared in front of him, a friendly smile on his wrinkled face.

"What can I do for you Master Harry?" he asked kindly.

Harry returned the smile. "I have something of importance that I need protected." He handed the dagger over to the elf. Molby took the

dagger and if it was possible he paled, his already large eyes widened and his hands trembled. He knew what it was.

"M-Master Harry...this is very dangerous." He stuttered fearfully.

"I know and that is why I need it to be put in a protected place. I need you to place it in the vault, somewhere far away from the other weapons. I want to be the only one who has any access to it. Do not speak of it with Mistress Hermione." He said firmly.

The elf swallowed hard but nodded shakily.

"Ye-Yes Master Harry. I will place it in a protected place."

"Thank you Molby." Harry thanked him earnestly. The elf nodded once more before popping out of the room.

Harry let out a slow breath when he was gone. He forced away the gnawing guilt and closed the guitar case, placing it back on its shelf. He was reaching to pick up the stack of books when he heard Cattie calling him from downstairs.

"Daddy! Mommy's home!" she shouted.

Harry hurriedly went over to one of the end tables and grabbed his wand, slipping it into the pocket of his jeans. He tucked the books under his arms and walked quickly out of the room. Cattie was no longer on the staircase when he walked down the steps. He heard voices in the family room so he walked to the room. He leaned against the doorway and peered inside.

Hermione stood in the middle of the room, Cattie standing close to her side and her hand on top of the little girl's head. Fred and George were also in the room along with Ron, Luna, Cho, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Padma, Parvati, Hannah, Ernie, Katie, Angelina, Justin and Lee Jordan. Curiously Ginny was absent from the group. Harry was surprised to see those who hadn't been at their little "meeting" at the Leaky Cauldron. Everyone was standing a bit uncomfortably, most looking around the room in awe. Harry couldn't help but smile a bit, they hadn't even seen the rest of the house yet.

"This is Cattie." Hermione was saying. Cattie smiled bashfully and waved slightly, her book tightly tucked under her arm.

"Hello." She said quietly, shyly.

Fred and George bowed gallantly and Fred shook Cattie's hand vigorously. "Very nice to see you again my dear lady."

"Quite a pleasure to once again see your lovely face." George said.

Cattie giggled. She liked Fred and George.

"Well, err, hello there." Ron said, rather awkwardly once Fred and George had stopped shaking the child's hand. The first time he had seen Cattie hadn't exactly been pleasant and he obviously didn't know how to behave around her.

Cattie smile brightly at him. Her mum and dad had told her all about Ron, she felt like she knew him already. "Hello, it's very nice to meet you!" she said happily.

"Well aren't you a pretty little thing!" Seamus said, reaching out a hand to shake hers. Cattie flushed slightly.

"Thank you." She said, shaking his hand.

Cho didn't come to greet the little girl like most of the other DA members, she seemed to only be able to watch her with wide eyes.

"Where's Harry?" Neville asked after all the greeting were over.

"Here." Harry said, steeling himself and stepping fully into the room. Everyone turned at the sound of his voice.

"There you are!" Hermione said, smiling. "I was wondering where you were."

"I was upstairs." He shrugged. He turned to the DA members and smiled. "Hello everyone."

Everyone murmured their hellos.

"Hey there Harry!" George greeted him exuberantly.

Fred grinned. "Nice place you have here."

Harry returned his grin. "Thank you." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "I guess we should be getting started."

Hermione nodded in agreement and turned to Cattie. "Ok Cattie, we're going upstairs for a while. You have a little less than an hour and then bed."

The little girl pouted but nodded. "Alright." She grumbled. Hermione smiled and leaned down to kiss her on the forehead.

"Goodnight Cattie."

"Night mum."

She padded over to Harry and he gave her his own goodnight kiss.

"We'll come and check on you later, ok?"

"Ok Daddy, goodnight." She waved to the rest of the group and left the room, more than likely heading for the library. When she was gone Harry turned back to the group.

"Everyone ready?"

"Yes, we're ready." Ron answered for everyone.

"Ok, let's go." Harry gestured for them to follow him. He led the group out of the family room and into the grand hallway. If they were awed before they were completely floored now. Lee let out a low whistle.

"Now *this* is a house." He said.

"Thank you." Harry chuckled. They continued on their way up the grand staircase.

"This is such a beautiful house." Lavender said as they walked up the stairs, running her hand over the banister. "Where are we exactly?"

“Scotland, somewhere out of Edinburgh.” Hermione answered her.

They stepped onto the second floor and turned to the second staircase, heading to the third floor and the dueling room. They had decided that the dueling room would be the best and safest place to hold the meeting. Bronson leaned against his frame when he saw the large group stepped into the hallway, he grinned widely and waved.

“Why hello there! What brings you by?” he asked exuberantly.

“Don’t mind him.” Caterina said. She was lounging on her little couch, petting the fat gray cat on her lap. “He’s easily excited.”

“These are a few friends of ours.” Hermione told the portraits. “We’re going to be in the dueling room for the next couple of hours, ok?”

Caterina nodded and Bronson’s grin widened. “May I watch?” he asked excitedly.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

They continued down the hallway, passing the potions lab and stopping at the door between it and the conservatory. Harry stepped forward and opened the dark stone door of the dueling room, gesturing for everyone to step inside.

“This is the dueling room.” He said as everyone filed in. “This is where we’ll be working.”

Hermione took the stack of books from his hands and placed them on the platform, crossing over to blue mats on the floor.

“It’s a bit...dark don’t you think?” Parvati commented, eyeing the stone room.

Ron rolled his eyes. “It’s fine.” He said. He crossed the room and dropped down onto one of the mats, stretching his long legs out in front of him. Luna floated after him and sat on the mat next to his, arranging her long green skirt around her legs. Fred and George looked at one another before flicking their wands and conjuring up two large red armchairs. The room dissolved into laughter, breaking

the slightly uncomfortable atmosphere that had plagued them since the group and stepped into the house. Harry conjured a few more mats and the rest of the DA members sat down.

“So, what exactly do you guys want to learn?” Harry asked, scratching behind his neck. He had sat on the floor in front of them, his back leaning against the platform. Hermione stood next to him.

“To fight.” Justin said simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“No, not just to fight.” Cho said, shaking her head. “To kill.” At the other’s wary looks she turned and looked them all in the eye. “You all know we can’t keep just stunning death eaters and letting the ministry deal with them because they’ll just get away and kill and torture again. They can’t be redeemed and we all know it.” Her speech gained more passion the more she spoke. “I don’t like the idea of killing but I *will* do what is necessary and stopping the death eaters, that *is* necessary.”

“She’s right.” Luna agreed, for once her voice completely devoid of its usual dreamy quality. Her eyes were burning and her hands were clenched tightly in her lap. “I want to know how to stop them.”

“It’s what we need to do.” Neville said strongly, his expression grim.

“Me too.” The twins said in unison, their faces serious.

Ron straightened and nodded. “I’m in.”

“O-Ok, me too.” Lavender said shakily, her face pale. Parvati was squeezing her friend’s arm tightly and biting her lip but she nodded. Her sister sighed and nodded too.

Angelina had been standing but she sat down heavily on the arm of Fred’s chair. “I can do it.” She said.

Hannah and Ernie nodded, squeezing each other’s hands.

“I’ll do it.” Justin said firmly.

Katie nodded. "I want to stop them too."

"You know I'm in." Seamus said.

Dean smiled grimly. "Yeah, me too."

Lee was the last to say anything but he nodded seriously. "We have to do what needs to be done."

The room felt heavy, they had just made the decision to kill and all of them felt the magnitude of it.

"Then it's settled." Harry said, breaking the heavy silence. "You guys understand that this is war? Just like when Voldermort came to power the first time." He made sure to meet everyone's eyes, ignoring the flinches at the mention of the Dark Lord's name. He continued when he was returned with grim nods. "The ministry failed the first time and they definitely aren't prepared for another one. This is going to be hard and very dangerous."

"We understand but it's something that needs to be done." Fred said seriously.

"I think our first order of business should be a name change." Hermione suggested, taking a seat on a nearby cushion.

"A name change? Dumbledore's Army should still fit what we're trying to do shouldn't it?" Lavender asked, confused.

Harry's face darkened. "No it shouldn't. Dumbledore has failed more with Voldermort and the war than the ministry."

"I thought you and Dumbledore were close?" Cho asked, eyebrows raised.

"We used to be." Harry said stiffly, clearly saying that part of the conversation was over. "Dumbledore knew about the possibility of Voldermort returning and he never did anything to prepare for it. He knew he had the power to make the wizarding world understand that it was only a matter of time before Voldermort came back but he

didn't try to warn anyone and now Voldemort is back and no is prepared for what is coming next."

"You can blame that *all* on Dumbledore." Ernie said angrily.

"No, I can't blame it all on him. I can also blame it on the ministry. Both of them failed to protect the wizarding world or inform the people so they could protect themselves. We need a name change because we aren't Dumbledore's army; we're doing this for the people of the wizarding world, for our families. Not for him." He could tell that they didn't agree with him about Dumbledore, some of them even looked a little angry but he hadn't really expected them to believe him right off the bat, Dumbledore meant too much too many people and he had been put on a almost saint like pedestal. For them to believe that the man wasn't perfect and pure was near impossible and Harry really didn't want to tackle the process of trying to convince them otherwise right now. "Look I know you guys don't agree with me but at least we agree that we need a new name, right?"

There was a murmur of reluctant agreement from the assembled teens.

"How about 'Teens for Justice'?" Parvati suggested.

Ron let out a loud laugh and she instantly flushed. Hermione slapped him on the arm, though she looked quite amused herself. Ernie shot Ron a dark look.

"Um, I don't think so." Dean said, a half amused half disgusted look on his face. "How about the 'Defense Crusaders'?"

"Why don't we just keep it as the 'Defense Association'?" Angelina sighed. "I think it still works for us."

"I agree." Fred nodded.

George grinned and whispered something in his twin's ear. Spots of color appeared on Fred's cheeks and he punched George on the arm.

Harry raised a hand. "All for Defense Association?"

The rest of the group raised their hands, Parvati more slowly than everyone else.

“Ok, the DA it is.” Harry stood up. “Now, the first thing I think we should do is review some of the spells we learned last year. We can start with *Expelliarmus*. Pair up and take turns casting.”

The others stood from their various seats around the room, Fred and George vanishing their cushy armchairs and the others pushing the cushions out of the way. Everyone pulled out their wands and paired up. Hermione sidled up next to Harry, lips quirked into a challenging smile. Harry grinned back.

“Ready?” Harry asked her, eyes sparkling.

She didn’t even bother to reply. His wand went flying through the air and into Hermione’s hand before he even had a chance to raise it. He shot her a mock glare and she gave him an innocent grin. The rest of the group took this as a signal to begin.

Ron had paired up with Luna and the blonde girl quickly disarmed him, the dreamy little smile never disappearing from her face. Cho was paired with Lee, Lavender of course with Parvati, Padma with Hannah, Ernie with Neville, Angelina with Justin, Dean with Seamus, and Fred with George. After about fifteen minutes the pairs switched. Harry had broke from practicing with Hermione and began doing a slow circuit of the room, to check on everyone’s progress. He could see a mark difference in nearly all of them. Ron, Luna and Cho fought with more aggressiveness than they had before, they were taking it a lot more seriously and he understood why. Luna had nearly lost her father to the death eater just like Ron had nearly lost not only his life but his sister. As for Cho...he wasn’t really sure what was driving her so hard. Neville was a bit more...coordinated than he was before. He moved with more grace than he had ever possessed before, his eyes focused and intense. All of them were taking what they were learning with more gravity than last year, now everyone knew quite vividly what was at stake.

They worked on *Expelliarmus* for another few minutes before switching to stunners. Harry noticed again that they all seemed stronger than they had before; their spells had more power, more

force to them than before. After another ten minutes or so they finished with the stunners and Harry stepped back to the front of the room.

“Um, you all did really well, even better than last year. I can tell you’ve been practicing.” He winked. “What I want us to work on today is household spells.”

“Household spells?” Padma asked, confusion on her face. “I thought we were supposed to be learning things that will help us fight death eaters?”

“Household spells *can* help us fight death eaters.” He flicked his wand and one of the dummies he and Remus used in their lessons appeared in front of him. “***Incendio.***”

A concentrated ball of fire flew from his wand and at the dummy. It collided with it and the dummy burst into bright orange flames before crumbling to the ground. With another flick of his wrist a stream of water flew from his wand and to the fire, extinguishing it. He turned back to the group with a small smirk.

“Now imagine if that was a death eater.” He said.

Luna burst into applause, grinning while the others looked at her with strange expression. It didn’t seem to bother her.

“That’s a rather gruesome way to die.” Angelina remarked, wincing.

Harry shrugged. “You don’t always have to put so much power into the spell, it can also be used to distract and not just to kill. There are lots of small spells that can do quite a lot of damage when used in a certain way. Like a hair thickening or growing spell, you can cast it on your opponent’s eyebrows and obscure their vision. With a banishing charm you could send a death eater flying into a wall or down the stairs. A drought charm could pull all the moisture from someone’s body. There are thousands of small spells people use everyday that could potentially save your life.”

“So are we only going to be learning small spells?” Neville asked.

Harry shook his head. "We'll get to the stronger spells. Right now we're going the subtle route. We'll start with Incendio." He flicked his wand again and more dummies appeared, one in front of each member of the DA. He made sure there was quite a bit of space between each person, the last thing they needed was to accidentally set fire to one another. "Try to regulate how much power you're putting into the spell, we don't want to burn the place down." He grinned. They began.

Two hours later they were cleaning ash off the walls and vanishing bits of the dummies. The DA was definitely stronger than they had been but they were a long way from being a real force. It was going to take a lot of work.

"I have to be going." Neville said, pushing himself from where he was sitting on the ground. "My Gran doesn't exactly know where I am." He flushed.

"How does your Gran not know where you are?" Dean snorted from his spot sprawled on the floor.

"Where does she think you are?" Hannah giggled from one of the cushions.

Neville's flush deepened. "In bed."

The entire room dissolved into laughter then. Neville continued to blush brightly but he soon joined in on the laughter.

Harry "Ok, ok everyone. Neville's right, it's getting late." He glanced at his watch. It was getting really late. Slowly everyone began getting up from their various spots around the room, gathering robes and getting ready to leave.

"So, when's the next meeting going to be?" Seamus asked, pulling the robes he had discarded earlier around his shoulders.

Harry looked over at Hermione and shrugged. She bit her lip thoughtfully before answering the Irish boy.

"Today's Thursday so how about...Saturday? Is that ok with everyone?" she asked.

"That sounds good," Cho said. "Same time?"

There were murmurs of agreement from the group. As soon as everyone was ready they left the dueling and room and began heading back to the family room. Bronson had made his way back to his frame and he and Caterina bid farewell to the DA, Bronson remarking exuberantly on their spell work. Bronson never failed to be exuberant.

They crossed the hallway and walked down the stairs, chatting amongst themselves in muted tones. It seemed almost rude to speak too loudly in the silent house. They once again walked down the stairs that led to the first floor of the cottage and into the family room.

"I'll see you guys Saturday." Neville said, smiling. He grabbed a handful of floo powder off of the mantle and the group bid him farewell. He threw the sparkling powder into the fireplace and soon he had disappeared in a rush of bright green flames. Next to leave was Ernie, then Dean and Seamus, then Angelina, then Lee, then Luna after a wave and a grin, then Cho, and then Fred and George.

"See you later Potter's." George grinned before stepping into the flames after his brother and flooing away. After Fred and George had disappeared through the flames Ron was the only one left in the room. They stood whether awkwardly for a second, none of them quite sure what to say to one another. Harry resisted the urge to sigh. He hated this. He missed when conversation between the three of them used to be easy, comfortable. Now it was so *hard*. They had all changed so much in the past few months, Harry and Hermione were parents now and the attack had changed Ron. He was a lot more serious and there was a darkness in his eyes that hadn't been there before. They were all so much...older now.

"So, how's your mum?" Harry asked, breaking the uncomfortable pause.

Ron shrugged. "Mum's good. She's been worrying like crazy though, she barely wants to let any of us out of the house." He shrugged again. "It's not like Ginny wants to anyway."

"What's the matter with Ginny?" Hermione asked with concern. She and Ginny weren't exactly seeing eye to eye right now but they had still been friends, sort of.

"She's...scared I think. I think that's why she didn't come to the meeting today. The attack really scared her." The sadness and helplessness was clearly heard in his voice.

Hermione placed a hand on his arm.

"She'll be fine Ron, she just needs some time."

"I know I just...I don't like see her like that." He said, running a hand over his face. They lapsed into silence again.

After a few seconds Hermione sighed heavily. "We can't keep going on like this." She bit her lip. "We need to be friends again."

"I don't know what to do about it." Harry confessed, shrugging helplessly. "I don't know how to fix this."

"I don't think things can be how they used to be, Hermione." Ron sighed.

Hermione placed a hand on each one of their arms, looking up at them with red-rimmed eyes. "I'm not asking for things to be like they used to be, we've all changed too much. I'm asking that we try to be best friends again."

"You're right Hermione, we've all changed a lot." Ron said. "The two of you, you've gone and started a family, a new life...without me."

Harry swallowed hard. "But it's not too late for you to be apart of our life Ron."

"We want you to be apart of our life Ron, apart of our family." Hermione said softly.

Ron swallowed hard and looked at the two of them, searching their faces with unusually bright blue eyes before nodding once. His lips quirked into a small smile. Hermione smiled brightly and pulled him into her arms, hugging him fiercely.

"Careful 'Mione, he needs to breathe." Harry teased, grinning himself. Hermione released him, still smiling and cheeks wet. She sniffled once and quickly wiped the traces of moisture from her face.

"I really should be going." Ron said, ears red. "Mum'll have a fit if I'm not home soon."

"Alright, you come back and visit us Ronald Weasley." Hermione said sternly, poking him in the chest. "Not just for the DA."

Harry clapped him on the shoulder. "We have a Quidditch pitch out back." He winked. He and Ron shared a grin and Hermione rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

"I'll do that." He grabbed a handful of floo powder out of the jar on the mantel and tossed it into the flames before stepping inside. "I'll see you guys later."

"Bye Ron." Harry waved.

"Bye Ron, you better come back and visit us!"

The redhead rolled his eyes but grinned. "I will." he waved once more. "**The Burrow!**" and with that he was gone.

"Well, the meeting went even better than expected." Hermione said, smiling brightly.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, everyone was stronger than they were last year."

"And they'll have to be for what's coming." The smile had faded from her face and she was frowning now. She shook her head, obviously trying to get rid of herself of whatever dark thoughts plagued her mind and she stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "You did good today Harry."

He smiled softly down at her. "Thank you."

"I'm going to go and check in on Cattie." She said, returning his smile. "You should go and get some sleep." She grabbed his hand and began leading him out of the room and to the staircase.

"Yes Ma'am" he mock saluted as they walked upstairs. They split in the hallway, Hermione heading one way to Cattie's room and he heading the other way to their bedroom. He entered the silent bedroom, kicked off his shoes, and padded over to the wardrobe. He yawned widely, blinking blearily. Hermione was right, he was tired. It was pretty late and the over-use of magic today left him feeling drained. He blinked suddenly heavy eyes at the clothing in the wardrobe before selecting a random pair of pajamas and walking toward the adjoining bathroom. He cut on the water in the shower and stepped into the warm spray. His eyes slipped closed and he leaned against the cool tile of the shower. It felt good to finally allow himself to relax, he had felt tense the entire time the members of the DA was there. It felt...off to have anyone other than the three of them and Remus and Tonks in their home. He felt a bit less safe now that some many people knew their secret, even with the spell that prevented any of them from telling the secret. He sighed and finished his shower before stepping out of it, drying himself and getting dressed. When he stepped back into the bedroom Hermione was already there and ready for bed. Her hair was damp so she must've taken a shower in one of the other bathrooms.

"How was Cattie?" he asked, walking over to the bed where she was seated. She looked up from the book perched on her lap.

"She was asleep, surprisingly. I expected to find her wide awake and reading."

Harry snorted. "She is her mother's daughter after all." He climbed into the bed. "What are you reading?"

"Hogwarts: A History."

He look at her incredulously. "Again? How can you possibly find it interesting after reading what, a thousand times?"

She slapped his arm, her cheeks coloring slightly. "I have not read it a thousand times Harry."

"I'm sorry, you're right. It was only nine-hundred and ninety-nine."

"Hush Harry. I trying to see if there is anything on Helga Hufflepuff I might've missed." She closed the well worn book and turned to look at him. "I think we should go and get the cup tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" he blinked. It was a bit soon but he had no qualms with getting this over with as soon as possible. He wasn't exactly looking forward to running into the Dursleys again but this was more important. "Alright, we can leave first thing tomorrow morning."

"*After* we see if Remus and Tonks will be able to look after Cattie while we're gone." She corrected him. She put the book on her end table and pulled down the covers.

Harry smiled and climbed under the blankets after her. "Of course." He leaned over and placed a kiss on her lips. "Goodnight, love."

"Night Harry. **Nox.**" The lights were extinguished and the room was plunged into comforting darkness.

The next morning came to see the Potter family in the family room getting ready to floo over to Remus and Tonk's house. Hermione had floo called them that morning to ask if they could keep an eye on Cattie while she and Harry were gone and they had readily agreed.

"Ready?" Harry asked, zipping up his black jacket.

Hermione finished pulling her hair into a ponytail. "Yeah, I'm ready."

"Me too." Catherine said, hopping off of the couch. Harry reached down and picked her up and she immediately assumed the 'floo position' as they has taken to calling it.

"Alrighty then, let's go. See you in a sec 'Mione." He grabbed a handful of floo powder, threw it into the flames and stepped inside. "**12 Grimmauld Place!**" and they were away. He stumbled lightly out

of the fireplace and into Remus and Tonk's living room. Cattie lifted her face from the nape of his neck and he placed her gently on the floor.

"Hello you two!" greeted Tonk's voice from behind them. She was seated on the couch, legs tucked under her and a hand on her rather large belly. If he didn't know better Harry would think she was having twins. Catherine grinned and practically skipped over to the couch.

"Hi Tonks!" she chirped.

"Hey Tonks." Harry greeted her, smiling. The fireplace flared green and Hermione stepped out, brushing invisible ash from her white sweater and jeans.

"Hello Tonks." She said to the older woman, walking over to give her a quick hug. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine and so is the little one." She beamed, tucking a piece of pale blonde hair behind her ear. "He's been quite active today."

Harry glanced around the room. "Where's Remus?"

"He went to Diagon Alley to pick up a few things, he should be back soon. Draco's upstairs." She added. "I doubt he'll come down and greet you though."

Harry snorted. "We don't need him to." He glanced at the watch on his wrist. "We should be going, we'll be back in a few hours." He leaned over and kissed Tonks on the cheek. "Thanks for taking care of Cattie while we're gone."

"It's no problem, we like spending time with her." She smiled. "You two just be safe." She didn't bother asking where they were going, she knew they weren't going to tell her.

Hermione hugged her. "We will." She turned and hugged Cattie and kissed her on the top of the head. "Be good, we'll be back in a few hours, love."

"I will." She said, hugging her mother back. Harry hugged her next.

“Have fun Kitty-Cat.”

“You too Daddy.”

They thanked Tonks again and made their way to the door. It was bright and sunny when they stepped outside but there was a chill in the air. Harry took Hermione's hand and they began walking down the sidewalk, heading to their usual alley. The street was as deserted as it normally was, their footsteps the only sound around them. They were soon at the alley. Harry reached into his bag and pulled out the shrunken bike, enlarged it, and pulled out the helmets. He handed one to Hermione and was about to pull his own on when Hermione's voice interrupted him.

“Are you sure you're ready for this Harry?” she asked him. He looked down at the helmet in his hands, brows furrowing. He knew she wasn't asking him if he was ready to get the horcrux, she was asking if he was ready to return Privet Drive. He wasn't sure he was, the thought of seeing the Dursleys...he didn't know what he'd do if he happened to run into any of them. But they needed to do this, getting that horcrux was way more important than his problems with the Dursleys.

He looked up and gave her what he hoped was a confident smile. “Yes, I'm ready.” He slipped on his helmet and swung onto the bike and Hermione climbed on after him. In less than a second they were tearing out of the alleyway. They zoomed through traffic, towards Privet Drive. It was a long ride but not as long as it had been when the Order had ‘rescued’ him before. In an hour or so they were slowing down and driving into Privet Drive. Harry swallowed hard, gripping the handlebars until his knuckles turned white. He had to try hard to resist the urge to turn around right then and there. He hated this place, he hated the memories that being here brought back. When he left here all those months ago, what seemed like years now, he had sworn he would never step foot here again and here he was. He felt Hermione's arms tighten around him, lending him comfort and he loosened his grip on the handlebars, letting some of the tension drain from him. At least this time he had Hermione.

He could see some of the residents peeking out of their windows at the two of them on the motorbike, it wasn't exactly the kind of vehicle you typically saw on Privet Drive. He couldn't help but smirk at the thought of the gossip they were going to cause, he almost wished that they could tell who he was. Aunt Petunia would have a heart attack. He slowed down some more, looking at the identical houses in the neighborhood to try and spot number six. They would have to pass by the Dursley's to get to the house. He sighed heavily and pressed the gas pedal a little bit harder, he wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. They continued down the narrow street, going quite a bit faster than was advised in the various signs around the neighborhood, and zipped past number four. No one appeared to be home, the absence of a ridiculously flashy car in the driveway a clear indicator. He was glad of that; it definitely lessened the chance of him running into them which was just about the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

"There it is." Hermione said through the helmet, pointing to a house that was of course identical to the others on the street.

Harry slowed down and turned into the empty driveway. He parked the bike and climbed off, Hermione after him.

"Do you think anyone's home?" Harry asked her, glancing around at the empty driveway.

Hermione smoothed down her hair and started for the front door. "There's only one way to find out."

He started after her. She was the first to reach the door so she rung the bell. There was no answer so she rung it again. They waited another minute or so and again there was no answer and she turned to Harry with a sigh.

"I don't think she's home."

Harry sighed himself and ran an agitated hand through his hair. He took a step back and eyed the house, pursing his lips. He didn't want to have to come back. "Why don't we just go inside and get it?"

"You mean break in?" she deadpanned.

“We’re not going to *break in* ‘Mione. We’ll just unlock the door.” He shrugged his shoulders innocently.

“Harry, you can’t just ‘unlock the door’ and go into someone else’s house!”

“Why not?” he quickly kept speaking when he saw her get ready to launch into a tirade. “Look, we need to get that cup. Courtesy isn’t exactly our top priority right now.”

“I understand that bu-” before she could finish her sentence a sleek black luxury sedan pulled into the driveway and parked next to the bike. Harry and Hermione turned quickly to the car. The engine was cut and the driver-side door opened. A man dressed in a pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, both flecked with paint, stepped out of the car. He had rather long brown hair pulled into a ponytail at the nape of his neck, a short beard, and blue eyes. He was rather tall and built like a runner. He had large work callused hands. He had a box tucked under one arm and his keys clutched in his hand. He smiled at them but Harry could see suspicion sparkling in his bright eyes. He had never seen the man before, he must not have been living on Privet Drive long. He didn’t seem like the type to be widely accepted in this neighborhood.

“Hello.” He greeted as he stepped closer to them. “How can I help you?”

Hermione gave him her warmest, sweetest smile. “Hello, my name is Hermione and this is Harry. We’re looking for Isabel Greythorn?”

The man’s smile widened, the laugh lines around his eyes deepening. “My name is John, Isabel would be my wife. She’s out of town right now, she should be back in a couple of days. Is there something I could help you with?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. “Um, we wanted to speak with her about a tea cup she may have purchased a few years ago.” Harry answered, smiling.

"Tea cup?" John furrowed his brows before shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I don't think I know anything about that." He looked truly apologetic.

"That's ok, would we be able to come back another time?"

"Of course, how about...Saturday afternoon?"

Hermione nodded. "Saturday afternoon will be fine. Would around twelve be okay?"

"Twelve it is. I hope she'll be able to help you." The older man reached out to shake their hands. "It was nice to meet you both."

"It was nice to meet you too." Harry smiled, returning the man's firm handshake. John gave them both another smile and a nod before unlocking his door and stepping into his house. "Well, that wasn't pointless at all." Hermione slapped him none too gently on the chest.

"We have a meeting with Isabel, we're one step closer to getting the tea cup."

He sighed and nodded. "Yeah, let's get out of here." He took her hand and they walked down to the bike. Hermione pulled the helmets out, handed him his and pulled her own on. He climbed up onto the bike and she climbed on after him. They pulled out of the driveway and began zooming back down the street, going back to Grimmauld. They were just passing number four when a bright red car, playing obnoxiously loud, obnoxiously bad music sped straight at them, causing Harry to swerve to the side avoid being run over. The car screeched to a stop, burning rubber and Harry stopped hard, the bike swerving. The doors of the car flew open and the driver and passengers jumped out. Harry gripped the handlebars tightly, anger rising in his chest. None other than Dudley Dursley and two of his goons stumbled out of the car which really seemed too small to even be able to support Dudley's girth.

"Hey! What the feck are you doing you idiot?!" Dudley shouted, chins jiggling. Harry winced, it seemed like Dudley had gotten bigger in the past few months.

He slowly began sliding off of the bike. Hermione grabbed his arm.

“Harry...” she said, her tone warning.

“Don’t worry ‘Mione. I won’t do anything. Stay here, I’ll be right back.” He stepped completely off of the bike, pulling off his helmet. “Hello there Dudders.” He said pleasantly, eyes cold.

Dudley gaped at him, mouth open in astonishment. “P-Potter? What are you...where’d you get that bike?!” his piggy little eyes trailed over the gleaming bike to Harry and over his obviously expensive clothes.

“It was a gift.” He shrugged. He handed his helmet to Hermione who was still on the bike and stepped closer to Dudley and his minions, hands nonchalantly shoved in the pockets of his dark jeans. “How’s life been treating you Dud?”

Dudley finally stopped gaping at him and glared, pulling himself into full height. Harry resisted the urge to grin, Dudley didn’t intimidate him any longer, he had dealt with far worse.

“You shouldn’t’ve come back Potter.” He spat, his fat hands tightening into fists. “Now we’ll have to beat your face in, just like when we were kids.” When he began to step closer to Harry, Hermione pulled off her helmet, Dudley noticed her for the first time. “Whose your friend?” he leered. Any of Harry’s fake pleasantries were gone in that instant. The smile disappeared from his face and his eyes grew hard.

“She is my fiancé.”

Dudley’s mouth dropped open at this.

“Fiancé?” one of Dudley’s goons exclaimed. A squirley looking guy with greasy blonde hair. “Who the hell would marry you?!”

“Who cares what bint would be stupid enough to want to marry Potter.” He cracked his knuckles. “We have some business to attend to.” He stepped forward again and Harry grinned at him.

"Are you sure you want to try anything Dudley?" he tilted his head, eyes glued to the other boy's. He let the wand he always carried around with him peek from beneath the hem of his sleeve so Dudley could clearly see it. The larger boy paled considerable, his great flabby face going from red to ashen white.

"You-you wouldn't try anything." He stammered, too quiet for his 'friends' to hear. "You'd get kicked out of that f-freak school."

Harry shrugged. "I'll take my chances." He leaned forward. "Do *you* want to take the chance?"

Dudley could see that he was serious and that whatever little bit of fear Harry might've felt for him was gone. He glanced at his friends, he had to save face in front of them but he didn't want to get turned into a toad by Harry. He was saved from trying to think himself out of the situation, which probably would've caused him much pain, when a car came around the corner. Harry recognized it instantly. It was Uncle Vernon's car. Running into Dudley was one thing but Vernon was the last person he felt like dealing with right then.

"Damn it." He muttered darkly. He turned from Dudley, who was now slowly beginning to grin at the pending arrival of his father, and began walking quickly back to the bike. Cursing under his breath he swung back onto the bike.

"Vernon's coming, we have to go." He said to Hermione.

"Good, at least we get to leave before there was any trouble." She said rather sharply, handing him his helmet. He pulled it on and jumped onto the bike, Hermione instantly wrapped her around his waist and Harry stepped on the gas, trying to get as far away from Privet Drive as soon as possible.

"Dad!" he heard Dudley shouting as he sped away from the muggles. "It's Potter! That was Potter!"

He couldn't resist the urge to glance back over his shoulder at Vernon. The man had stopped his car and was now standing next to the open door watching them with wide eyes and a furious, purple face. A grin tugged at Harry's lips. Maybe *that* was worth the trip.

"Well that was useful." Hermione said through the helmet as they sped out of Privet Drive.

"Maybe not useful but it was definitely worth it." He grinned.

She snorted. "Hopefully we won't run into any of your *relatives* Saturday." She spit out the word 'relatives' like a curse. She held very little regard for the Dursley's.

"I hope not. I just want to get that tea cup. It might've been easier to just get inside, find it, and get out."

"Maybe so Harry but for all we know she might not even have it anymore and then what? Look at least this way we'll know for sure where the cup is."

"And soon we'll be able to destroy it."

On that note he pressed the gas even harder and sped back to Grimmauld Place to pick up Cattie. It was another long while before they pulled back into the alley and climbed off of the bike. They put away the helmets and the bike and made their way down the sidewalk and to Grimmauld. Hermione knocked on the door and after a couple of minutes Malfoy came to the door and let them in. He was wearing muggle jeans and a dark blue t-shirt and his feet were bare. He as usual sneered at them though it didn't hold much venom.

"Cattie's in the kitchen." He said before turning and heading back to the kitchen. They followed him through the living room and to the kitchen, they could hear voices coming through the door and the familiar sound of Cattie's happy giggle. Malfoy opened the door and stepped inside, sliding onto a stool at the island table. Remus and Tonks were seated on one side of the island and Catherine and Malfoy on the other. Plates of food were in front of all of them, they had obviously interrupted dinner.

"Hi Mummy! Daddy!" Cattie greeted them happily, waving her fork at them.

"What are you two doing here?" Remus asked. "I didn't expect you two back so early."

"We ran into a few...complications." Harry stepped over and kissed Cattie on the top of her hair. "What's for dinner?"

"Meat Pie, would you like to join us?" Tonks answered him, waving a hand at one of the two stools left.

Harry looked over at Hermione, an eyebrow raised. She shrugged and sat down on one of the proffered stools, next to Remus. "Sounds good." Harry slid onto the only available stool which happened to be right next to Malfoy. Remus stood up and stepped over to the stove, picking up two extra plates of the golden pies and vegetables. He flicked his wrist and two tall, cool glasses of pumpkin juice appeared in front of them next to the plates.

"Thank you Remus." Hermione thanked him. Harry could only give him a thumbs up, already having dug into the pie. It was delicious, hearty and piping hot, the crust perfectly flaky and buttery. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. He swallowed a mouthful of meat and vegetables before taking a large gulp of the icy cold orange drink.

"Delicious." He grinned. Hermione rolled her eyes at him, chocolate orbs sparkling, and Tonks laughed. She stopped laughing abruptly, the laughter falling into a sharp gasp. She winced and placed a hand on her back, grimacing.

"Dora? Love, what's wrong?" Remus asked worriedly, his eyes concerned. Tonks shook her head and forced a smile but they could all see it was pained.

"Nothing, nothing I'm fine." She gasped slightly. "My back has just been hurting me a bit."

Hermione furrowed her brows and put down her fork. "How long has it been hurting?"

"Since this morning actually." She saw Remus's and Draco's outraged looks and shrugged sheepishly. "I didn't want to worry you. It's not really that bad, it comes and goes."

"Is it like a dull pain or a sharp pain?" Hermione asked intently.

The older woman winced again. "Sharp. Like a stabbing pain in my lower back."

Hermione paled then and swallowed visibly, standing up. "Tonks, I think you might be in labor." She said as calmly as possible.

"N-no! That's impossible! It's too soon." She shook her head vigorously. Remus had paled considerably.

"Dora, I think she's right." He said, his voice sounding strangely choked.

Tonks shook her head again and stood up with difficulty, holding tightly onto the edge of the island. "No." she said firmly. "This is not happening no-" her words were cut off by a pained gasp and her knees bucked, she would've hit the floor if Remus hadn't reacted quickly and grabbed her around the waist. Harry and Malfoy both jumped to their feet.

"Hermione, I think you might be right." Tonks gasped, face twisted with pain. "I'm in labor."

A/N: -ducks flying objects- I'm sorry! I know it took me forever to get this chapter up but I got an extremely sever case of writer's block. I got stuck on the DA meeting, I've never written one before and couldn't seem to. The next chapter will definitely be up sooner than this one. Thank you all for reading and for your reviews!

Chapter 30

Everyone froze for a second until Tonks let out another pain filled cry and clutched her stomach. That kicked everyone into gear. Remus took a tighter hold on her waist and began leading her out of the kitchen and into the living room.

“Draco, go upstairs and get the bag please. It’s in our wardrobe.” He said calmly. Malfoy nodded quickly and ran out of the room; they heard him thumping up the stairs before the kitchen door had even swung closed. “We need to get to St. Mungos right now.”

Harry scooped up Cattie and flicked his wand, the little girl’s shoes flew from somewhere in the house and into his hands. “We’re ready.” He said as they followed the couple into the living room.

“You guys are coming?” Tonks gasped out.

Hermione waved a hand dismissively. “Of course we are. Are you ok?”

Tonks nodded, biting her lip and squeezing her eyes shut. She obviously wasn’t ok. She whimpered and Remus kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

“We’re going to be leaving soon love, everything is going to be ok.”

She chuckled once, her silver eyes filling with tears. “I know, I just wished I was dressed in something a bit more stylish.” She was dressed in a pair of dark grey sweatpants and a faded red t-shirt that must have been Remus’s. Her pale hair had been pulled into a messy ponytail and her feet were bare.

Remus chuckled himself. “You look beautiful.”

Malfoy came sprinting down the stairs, a blue bag slung over his shoulder. He had pulled on a pair of shoes and black robes. “Got it. Let’s go.”

"You can't come with us Draco, it's not safe." Remus said, as gently as he could.

Malfoy scowled and shook his head. "There is no way I'm staying here while Tonks has the baby. I don't care who sees me I'm coming with you."

Tonks winced again. "Draco, if someone recognizes you your father could-"

"I don't care about that right now, I don't care if anyone recognizes me. This is more important."

"I think he should come." Harry said suddenly, surprising everyone including himself. "I have an idea." He shifted Cattie to his other hip and waved a hand over Malfoy's face. The other boy's white blonde hair began to darken, turning into a light brown color similar to Remus's. It grew longer so his bangs hung in his eyes, helping to obscure them.

"Wait, you still look a bit too much like yourself." Hermione picked up one of the red pillows from the couch and flicked her own fingers at it. It was instantly transfigured into a pair of gold framed glasses. "They're just glass but it changes your appearance a little more."

"Thank you." Draco said, taking the glasses she handed to him. He quickly put them on.

Remus grinned. "Great, let's get going. You ready Dora?"

"More than ready." She grunted.

Remus shifted Tonks slightly and grabbed a handful of floo powder from their mantel and through it into the flames. He and Tonks, who was now gnawing on her bottom lip, stepped into the hearth.

"St. Mungos!" the couple disappeared in a swirl of green.

"See you guys there." Hermione stood on her toes and kissed both he and Cattie quickly on the cheek. She took her own handful of floo

powder and threw it into the fire before flooing to St. Mungos herself. Harry was about to floo after her when Malfoy cleared his throat.

“Potter?”

Harry turned to the other boy with a raised eyebrow.

“Thanks.” He muttered.

“You’re welcome.” He nodded once and turned to the fireplace, preparing to floo away himself. He threw his own handful of floo powder in and stepped inside. “You ready?” he asked the little girl in his arms.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

“**St. Mungos!**” and they were away. They landed in the bright white room that was the lobby of St. Mungos. Today it wasn’t nearly as busy or chaotic as it had been the first time he was here and he was glad of that. He glanced around the slightly full room, ignoring the few witches and wizards that stared at him and Catherine with wide eyes and spotted Hermione, Remus, and Tonks standing at the large oval counter at the far end of the room. He took Cattie’s hand and they were about to make their way over to the group when Malfoy stepped gracefully out of the floo. He quickly stepped over to them and Harry took Cattie’s hand. Together the three of them began walking over to the group.

“Is Tonks really having the baby?” Cattie asked as they crossed the brightly lit lobby.

Harry smiled down at her. “Yes she is, love.”

“Good! I felt like I’ve been waiting *forever*.”

Harry laughed lightly. By then the three of them had reached the counter and the rest of their group.

“Here’s a chair Mrs. Lupin, we’ll take you to your room right now.” A Mediwitch was saying. She was holding the handles of a chair that looked like a wheelchair but more cushioned, almost like an armchair.

The Mediwitch was a kind looking woman with dark hair pulled into a bun at the nape of her neck. She had large dark brown eyes and a soft smile. She was rather petite but she looked strong.

"Are you ok?" Draco asked Tonks, concern clearly evident in his voice. He held onto one of her arms, Remus the other, and they helped her into the chair.

"I'm fine." She assured him, smiling thinly. "Feels like he's trying to kick his way out of me though." She joked feebly.

"Hello, I'm Mediwitch LaNora. We'll be taking her to a room just down this hall, are you all coming along?" The Mediwitch asked. She had a musical voice, touched with a light Scottish accent.

"Yes." They all answered firmly, in unison.

The woman laughed lightly. "Alright then, follow me please."

They followed the woman, and Remus who held the other handle of the chair, around the desk and down a nearby corridor. This hallway was different from the one Harry and Hermione had gone down with the Weasley's; unlike the bright white of the other hallway these walls were painted in a bright sunny yellow, the doors all painted white. The same light was on these doors as were on the others but unlike the others there was a second, large round light under it. Some of the lights were glowing blue and others pink. A few of them were white and flashing. There were rows of plushy white chairs placed against various spots on the walls. They stopped at a door in the middle of the hallway and it swung open without anyone touching it.

"This will be your room." LaNora said, stepping into the room. "Ok Mrs. Lupin, we're going to get you up on this bed and check on your little one."

She tapped Tonk's chair with her wand and it began floating off of the ground. It floated until it was level with the red and white bed. Tonks floated from the chair and onto the bed, gently being settled onto the red pillows. The room was red and trimmed in white with a light wood floor. There was a large round window at the far end of the room which was obviously enchanted to show a sunny flower filled meadow.

Next to the bed was a square panel with rows of different colored buttons.

LaNora flicked her wand at Tonks and her clothing was changed from the shirt and pants to a knee-length gown that look like the ones worn in the muggle world but a bit more modest, without the bits hanging out. With that done she waved her wand over Tonk's belly and a soft purple light surrounded it. The sound of a heartbeat filled the room. It sounded a strange, a bit too fast, erratic. The Mediwitch frowned and flicked her wand again, muttering something under her breath. A small scroll popped out of the wand and she caught it in her other hand. The scroll enlarged and unrolled. She stared hard at it, her frown deepening and brow furrowing.

"What's wrong?" Remus asked worriedly.

The woman sighed and looked up at him, concern visible in her dark eyes. "There's a problem." She said seriously.

"What kind of problem?" Tonks asked frantically, the pain still very obvious on her face.

"I'm not quite sure yet. I need to get another Mediwizard in here." She walked over to a space next to Tonk's bed and held down an orange button on the panel. "Could you please send Damian in?" she spoke.

"Yes Ma'am." A voice said from somewhere within the panel. LaNora stepped away from the panel and back over to Tonks. She began waving her wand in slow circles over her round belly, mutter a long incantation under her breath.

"Remus?" Tonks whimpered. The man was at her side in an instant, grabbing her hand.

"Yes, love?"

"Could you-could you owl my parents please? I want them here." She said, tears had begun to stream from her eyes and down her cheeks.

"Of course I can, I'll do it now." He leaned down and held her face, kissing her softly on the lips. After squeezing her hand he stepped out

of the room. As soon as Remus vacated his spot next to Tonks Draco was there, grabbing onto her hand. If possible he looked paler than ever before, his eyes full of concern and apprehension. Harry could honestly say he had never seen the other boy look so fearful, so lost.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, biting his bottom lip.

"J-Just hold my hand."

"Daddy?" Cattie whispered in a tiny voice. Her voice was filled with fear and confusion, she didn't know what was going on. Harry reached down and pulled her into his arms, kissing her on top of the head.

"It's alright Kitty-Cat." He murmured to her, hoping to reassure her. Truthfully he was worried himself and not a little scared. Something was wrong with the baby, something bad. He didn't think Remus or Tonks could take it if something happened to the baby, he didn't think any of them would be able to take it. He closed his eyes and prayed to whatever deity that might be watching over them to keep the baby safe and healthy.

Throughout all this LaNora had continued running her wand over Tonks's stomach, the frown on her face continuing to deepen with every passing second. They all sat in tense silence a few minutes longer, the only sound in the room Tonks's pained grunts and barely stifled cries of pain.

"Can't you give her something for the pain?" Draco finally burst out, fixing the Mediwitch with the patented Malfoy glare. It didn't seem to faze the woman at all, she was probably used to getting that kind of treatment from distressed family members.

"We can't give her any potions or cast any spells on her until we know for sure what is happening." She said soothingly.

Malfoy opened his mouth, more than likely to say something scratching when Remus stepped back into the room along with a rather large man dressed in Mediwizard robes. The werewolf rushed back to Tonks's side and took her other hand, placing his free hand gently on her brow. Her face was scrunched in pain now, shuddering

little gasps escaping her mouth every once in a while. Harry at first thought he recognized the man as Cosmas from his first visit to St. Mungos but when he looked closer he could see that it was a different man. Cosmas had rather wild black curls while this man's curls were longer and pulled into a neat ponytail. His beard was also better groomed than the other man's. Other than that they looked exactly the same with the same sun freckled face and large warm smile. This was obviously the twin brother Cosmas had mentioned. Something about him put them all instantly at ease. This man obviously knew what he was doing.

"Hello, I'm Mediwizard Damian. How are you feeling Mrs. Lupin?" he asked in his deep, accented voice.

"How-how do you think I'm feeling?" Tonks managed to gasp out between clenched teeth. Harry could see Hermione start with surprise, Tonks was one of the last people in the world you expected to snap at anyone. Damian didn't look the least bit offended, if anything he looked slightly amused.

"I imagine not too good." He took out his wand and waved it over her stomach. "**Acclaro Fetus.**" He murmured. A pale yellow light shot from the wand and to Tonks's stomach. A large round orb, golden in color floated into the air, directly about Tonks. They all gasped. Projected inside the orb was an image of the baby. Everything was tinted gold but they could see everything in amazing detail. You could see every toe, every finger, every eyelash. They could see his tiny little nose, lips, and they could even see his hair. The amazing sight of the baby wasn't the only thing that caused the gasp, it was because now they could clearly see what the problem was. The umbilical cord was wrapped around his tiny neck. Another small scroll fluttered out of Damian's wand and he caught it. His deep brown eyes scanned over it quickly and he frowned deeply before handing it to the Mediwitch next to him. LaNora scanned it herself before letting out a low curse and running over to the panel, once again pressing down the orange button.

"We have an umbilical cord compression, we need get this baby born right now." She said.

“Yes Ma’am.” The voice responded again.

“An umbilical what?” Remus asked frantically. “What’s going on?” Tonks was now clutching his arm, her arms wide and full of fear.

Damian sighed and ran a hand over his hair, concern was now clearly seen in his eyes. “Umbilical Cord Compression. Sometimes because the baby moves around a lot in the womb, especially during labor, the umbilical cord can get wrapped and unwrapped around the baby many times. While it can cause sudden, short drops in the baby’s heart rate, called variable decelerations, which is what you heard earlier it usually isn’t very dangerous. It happens in one out of every ten or so births and is rarely a major concern and most babies quickly pass through this stage and the birth proceeds normally but sometimes it can be very dangerous.” He sighed. “Unfortunately your son’s heart rate is too erratic and there is a decrease in fetal blood. The umbilical cord is also wrapped too tightly around your son’s neck and it is causing him harm. We’ll have to speed up your labor. He has to be born in the next hour.” He reached out and placed one of his large brown hands on each of Tonks and Remus’s shoulders. “It sounds scary but once your son is born we’ll be able to unwrap the cord and he’ll be perfectly healthy, it’s a fairly easy procedure.”

Tonks nodded hastily at the Mediwizard. “Ok, just do everything you can to save our baby.”

“I will.”

The door swung open and three more people entered, all dressed in the knee-length white robes of Medi wizards.

“Ok, we need everyone but the mother and father to clear out of the room please.” One of them, a woman, said firmly.

“We’ll be right outside, ok Tonks?” Hermione said, standing up and squeezing the older woman’s leg gently. Tonks nodded, offering them a shaky smile. Harry placed a hand on Remus’s shoulder, meeting his eyes. He wasn’t really sure what to say, what he could say to possibly lessen the fear that the man was feeling. Remus gave him a thankful smile, his amber eyes full of worry. Malfoy leaned over the bed and kissed Tonks quickly on the cheek.

"Please be ok." He whispered. His looked so scared, it was disconcerting. Tonks reached up and placed a hand softly against his cheek, rubbing it with her thumb.

"I will. We both will." He nodded, swallowing hard and stepping away from the bed. He followed Harry, Hermione, and Cattie out of the room and out into the hallway. They settled themselves in the four chairs directly across from the now closed door, Cattie climbing up onto Hermione's lap and clinging to her mother. Hermione wrapped her arms around the little girl and placed her chin on top of her soft curls. This was terrifying for all of them, no one had expected anything like this to happen. Harry stared down at his hands which were clasped tightly together in his lap. Nothing could happen to that baby, Remus and Tonks simply didn't deserve it. No one did. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Malfoy, who was sitting next to him, with his head in his hands. He had never seen him show so much emotion but he guessed this was almost as hard on him as it was on Remus and Tonks. This little family was all he had now. They sat in tense, anxious silence a bit longer before Harry turned to Malfoy.

"Malfoy...are you-are you ok?" he asked, breaking the silence.

The once blonde boy lifted his head from his hands. "No."

"Malfoy, I-" before he could finish his sentence two people came running down the hall. It was Ted and Andromeda Tonks.

"Where is she?" Mrs. Tonks asked frantically when she reached them. Her pale blonde hair was mussed, haphazardly pulled into a bun and her eyes were frantic. Mr. Tonks didn't look much better, Harry could swear his shoes weren't even fully on his feet.

"She's in the room right there." Hermione answered her, pointing to the door in front of them. "They want no one inside except her and Remus."

Andromeda shook her head and stormed towards the door. "I'm her mother, I have every right to be in there." With that the door swung open and she stepped inside. They all waited a few seconds, expecting to see her come right back out but when she didn't return they safely assumed the Medi wizards hadn't been able to kick her

back out. When he saw that his wife hadn't gotten booted out of the room Ted Tonks shrugged at them and stepped in after her.

"If they can go in I'm going in too." Malfoy said, standing to his feet. Before he could storm his way back into the room the door swung open again and Mr. Tonks stepped right back out.

"Apparently it's only parents and grandmother." He said, smiling feebly but the smile didn't near reach his eyes. He shuffled over to the only empty chair which was right next to Hermione and Cattie and sat down heavily. He ran a hand over his graying brown hair and down his face, sighing. He was visibly just as scared and worried as they all were. The five of them lapsed into silence, all staring at the door and all praying for the safety of Tonks and the baby.

It was two or three very long and anxious hours later that the door finally opened again. As soon as the door opened a welcome and beautiful sound reached their ears. A loud baby's cry filled the hallway and they all let out a sigh of relief. Ted Tonks's eyes were full of tears and tears were streaming down Hermione's face. Malfoy's eyes were red rimmed and he was swallowing repeatedly, a huge smile tugging at his lips. Harry was full on grinning; he felt like his face would split in half he was smiling so widely and Cattie was smiling happily. Remus stepped into the hallway, tears running down his cheeks and a wide smile on his beaming face.

"I have a son."

(Line here)

Twenty minutes later they were filing into Tonk's hospital room. They had been kept out while the baby was cleaned and Tonks taken care of but now they were finally allowed to see the new little Lupin. Tonks was on the bed, sitting propped up against the pillows. Strands of her pale blonde hair were plastered to her damp face and a tired smile on her face. Her mother was leaning against the edge of the bed and tenderly stroking her hair, tears in her eyes. Mr. Tonks instantly made his way over to her side. Remus was also on the bed, sitting close to his wife and in his arms was a blue bundle. He looked up from the bundle when they stepped inside, his amber eyes red and a purely joyful smile on his face.

“Hey.” He said softly. “I want you all to meet Jackson Sirius Lupin.”

Malfoy stepped, almost hesitantly, closer to the bed and looked down at the bundle of soft blue blankets in Remus’s arms. The older man gently pulled the blanket down so the baby was clearly visible. Harry had to catch his breath. He was beautiful. He was a chubby little thing, bigger than your average newborn, with soft white blonde hair that crowned his tiny head. His large eyes were open to revealing bright amber orbs identical to his father’s. He had a heart shaped face, a sweet button nose, and small red lips. He blinked up at the people above him with wide, curious eyes. He looked surprisingly calm considering he was in a practically brand new world.

“Hello there Jackson.” Malfoy whispered, reaching a finger into the blankets to gently run it over the baby’s soft face. Jackson’s little hand grabbed the finger, wrapping impossibly tiny fingers around it. Draco inhaled sharply, staring down at the small hand gripping his finger in awe. He rubbed his thumb over the baby’s fingers, his eyes bright with moisture. “You gave us quite a scare there.”

“And don’t you do it again young man.” Remus said, running his own finger over the babe’s soft hair.

Tonks chuckled tiredly. “Oh don’t fuss at him, he just wanted to make a memorable entrance into the world.” She looked up from the baby and over to Harry, Hermione, and Cattie who were all still standing at the foot of the bed. Harry almost felt like they were intruding. “Well don’t just stand there.” She said. “Come and see what I did.”

The three of them stepped closer to the bed. Harry lifted Cattie into his arms so she could see the baby. She leaned over and peered down into the blankets at Jackson.

“He’s so *pretty*.” She gasped.

“He is beautiful.” Hermione said, sounding just as awed as her daughter.

Remus nodded, his eyes glued to his son. “Yes he is, just like his mother.” He leaned over and kissed Tonks on the forehead. Tonks smiled lovingly at him and squeezed his arm.

“Jackson Sirius Lupin.” Harry said, smiling down at the baby. “It fits him.”

“That it does.” Ted Tonks agreed, grinning down at his brand new grandchild. “I can imagine it now. ‘Jackson Sirius Lupin put that down! Jackson Sirius Lupin come back here!’”

They all laughed and Jackson’s eyes widened. Harry had to admit he already looked like a bit of a troublemaker, he was the son of a marauder after all. When the laughter had died down Tonks sat up a bit more and leaned forward so she could look down at her child. She lifted her hand and placed it tenderly on the top of his head, smiling a smile filled with absolute love.

“Welcome to the family baby Jack.”

(Line here)

It was quite late by the time the Potter family floored out of St. Mungos and the now complete Lupin family. Cattie had long ago fallen asleep and was carefully cradled in Harry’s arms when he stumbled out of the fireplace in the family room. Luckily he didn’t fall. He seemed to be getting better at flooring though he still hadn’t mastered stepping out of the fireplace without stumbling. He pushed the thought of his poor flooring style out of his mind and adjusted his hold on Cattie, he didn’t understand how in the world she could sleep through flooring. He had just stepped out of the way when Hermione stepped out of the floo after him. He almost pouted at her easy landing. Maybe it was something he needed to read up on.

“Is she still asleep?” She whispered, gesturing towards the little girl in his arms.

“Like a baby.” He yawned, he was tired himself. “I’ll take her upstairs and put her to bed. Why don’t you go get ready for bed, you look as exhausted as I feel.” And she did, she looked ready to drop. It was no wonder they were so tired though, it had been a rather long and eventful day.

“That sounds good.” Hermione agreed. The three of them left the dimly lit room and into the hallway, making their way upstairs. They

split at the landing, Hermione going to their bedroom and Harry heading to Cattie's. The room was of course dark when he nudged the door open with his foot and stepped inside.

"Lumos." The room was instantly lit. He walked across the room and over to Cattie's bed, stepping over Trouble who was cleaning his paws. He pulled down the pale blue blankets with his free hand and gently laid her down under them. He flicked his wrist and her jeans and sweater were changed into a pair of purple pajamas. He pulled off her shoes and tucked the blankets around her small body.

He leaned down and dropped a kiss on her head. "Goodnight Kitty-Cat." He stepped away from the bed and walked quietly back over to the door. *"Nox."* The lights were extinguished and he stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

He yawned widely as he walked down the hallway towards his and Hermione's bedroom. He was bone tired. He hadn't expected to be at St. Mungos for so long but he really didn't mind it, he was glad to have been able to be there to see Jackson brought into the world. His mouth was tugged into a tired smile as he thought of the new addition to the Lupin family. He really was a beautiful baby and now when he looked at the Lupin's they looked...complete, Malfoy included. Malfoy. He furrowed his brows at the thought of the other boy. He had never seen him show so much emotion, he honestly didn't believe that he actually cared that much for Remus, Tonks, and the baby. He really hadn't thought he cared much for anyone at all except himself. To say it was shocking was a bit of an understatement.

He had reached the bedroom by then and he stepped through the already open door, nudging it closed behind him. The room was dark and he didn't see Hermione in the room but he could hear the shower running so he assumed she was already taking her shower. He yawned again and kicked off his shoes, dropping his bag to the floor. He wanted nothing more than to throw himself across their big bed and go to sleep right then and there but he was pretty sure Hermione would have a fit if he went to bed fully clothed. Blinking his eyes blearily he shuffled over to the wardrobe and pulled out something to sleep in. He wasn't even sure if it matched but frankly he really didn't care. He began pulling off his clothes, tossing them onto the floor. He

couldn't muster up enough energy to wait for Hermione to finish her shower and take his own. He'd do it in the morning. He sluggishly pulled on the pajamas and padded back over to the bed, slinking underneath the cool sheets. He'd clean the clothes off of the floor in the morning. His eyes had closed and he was just beginning to slip into sleep when the door to the bathroom opened and Hermione stepped into the bedroom. She must've thought he was asleep because she tiptoed as quietly as possible over to the bed and carefully sat down. The warm smell of her vanilla shampoo filled his nose and he shifted closer to her, laying his head on her lap, his eyes closed.

"Hey." He murmured, still not opening his eyes.

"Hey, I guess you're not taking a shower tonight, hmm?" she asked quietly. He felt her fingers softly began to play with the strands of his dark hair and he slowly opened his eyes, looking up at her.

"I will in the morning, I'm too tired right now." He yawned and snuggled closer to her. The feeling of her fingers gently caressing his scalp was quite pleasant.

"Yeah, so am I." She stopped playing with his hair and stretched languidly. Harry frowned at the loss of contact then moved over a bit so she could slide under the blankets, snuggling up close to him and placing her head on his chest.

"I'm so happy for Remus and Tonks." She said.

"So am I, I'm just glad the Jackson was okay."

"Me too." They lapsed into silence and after a few minutes Harry began to once again drift off to sleep. Hermione's voice roused him again. "Harry?"

"Hmm?" there was no way he was opening his eyes again.

"Do you ever think...do you ever think about that happening to us one day?"

That made him open his eyes. He forced his heavy lids open and looked down at Hermione who was biting her lip, looking back up at him.

“About what happening?”

“Having our own children.”

Harry licked his lips and knotted his brows together. “We do have our own child, we have Cattie.”

Hermione propped herself up on her elbows and rolled her eyes. “Of course Harry and I love her as much as if she was born as my own, I just mean do you ever see us having more children?”

“Well, yeah.” He shifted, scratching the top of his head. “I’ve always wanted a big family and I think we’d have beautiful kids. You’re a great mum already and the only person I can see being the mother of my children.”

A wide, soft smile slowly spread across her face and even in the dark of the room he could see her eyes brighten with moisture.

“And you are an amazing father to Cattie and I know you’ll be an amazing father to the rest of our children.” She leaned forward and kissed his gently, sweetly on the lips.

When they finally released one another Harry grinned down at her, pulling her closer. “Now.” He snuggled back into the blankets. “Let’s get some sleep.”

Hermione laughed lightly but she finally closed her eyes. “Goodnight, love.”

“Night ‘Mione.”

(Line here)

He was the first to wake that morning. The curtains were open to let the sun in, something that DeeDi made sure to do every morning. The warmth of it was the first thing that woke him up; the second was

the feeling of eyes boring a hole in his head. He slowly slid open his lids, green eyes blinking blearily into the sudden light. Sitting cross-legged between him and the still sleeping Hermione, staring down at him with identical bright green eyes was Cattie.

"Good morning Daddy." She whispered, grinning happily.

He yawned widely and pushed himself into a sitting position. "Morning Cattie, why are you up so early?"

The little girl deposited herself on his lap, leaning against his chest. "Well *Daddy*, I wanted to know if we could go and see Jackie today?"

"Jackie?" He screwed his eyebrows together in confusion. He had just woken up, he was a bit slow.

Cattie sighed heavily, rolling her eyes in dramatic exasperation. "*Jackson*. I want to go and visit him and Tonks today." She propped her chin on his chest and pouted cutely, her eyes becoming wide. "*Please?*"

He had to grin, she never failed to try and turn that puppy-dog look on him. He stood up, careful to not disturb Hermione, with Cattie still in his arms.

"I'll talk to your Mum about it." He conceded. Today was Saturday which meant he and Hermione had to not only host another DA meeting but they also had to go back to Privet Drive. They'd make time to go back to St. Mungos though, he wanted to see Jackson and Tonks too.

He padded over to the wardrobe and set Cattie down on the floor. She watched, surprisingly quietly, as he opened the door of the wardrobe and selected a pair of faded jeans and a simple black t-shirt. He yawned again and pulled the clothes out.

"Why don't you go get dressed, love? I'll meet you downstairs for breakfast." He said quietly, keeping his voice low as to not wake up his still sleeping fiancé.

The little girl shrugged. "Ok, don't forget to ask mum!" she turned and left the room. Smiling, he headed to the bathroom to take his shower.

Fifteen minutes later he was stepping out of the steamy bathroom fully dressed and a lot more awake than he had been. Hermione was awake by then, her curls wild on top of her head, yawning and shuffling sleepily towards the wardrobe.

"Good morning sunshine." He grinned, walking over to her.

"Morning." She grunted.

Harry laughed and leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead. "Cattie wants to go back to St. Mungos today."

"Sounds good to me." She shrugged. "I'd like to see how they're doing, if we leave soon we should have more than enough time to visit with them then get to Privet Drive."

"Looks like it's going to be another long day. How about we leave after breakfast?" he leaned over her head and grabbed his robes and his shoes.

"Alright." She yawned again. He kissed her again and began to make his way to the bedroom door. "I'll be downstairs with Cattie when you're finished." He called over his shoulder as he stepped out of the room and into the hallway.

"I'll see you in a bit!" she called back.

He closed the door behind him and made his way down the hallway and to the staircase. He walked downstairs and headed towards the dining room, Cattie was probably already down there and starting on breakfast. He crossed the hallway to the door of the dining room, his bare feet making a soft slapping sound on the cool floor. Cattie was, just as he thought, already in the room when he stepped inside.

She was sitting at the table with a bowl of steaming porridge, blue and red berries on the top. When he sat down she was gulping down a tall glass of milk. She put down her glass and grinned at him.

“Hello Daddy, is Mum awake yet?”

Harry dug a spoon into his own porridge, which had popped in front of him, and nodded. “Yes, she should be down soon.”

“So are we going to go and visit Jackie and Tonks today?”

“Yes, as soon as breakfast is over.” He grinned when the little girl squealed and clapped her hands. They were finishing up their breakfast when Hermione walked into the dining room. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail and her robes were slung over one arm. She sat down next to Harry and a bowl of the sweet, buttery porridge appeared in front of her.

“So, are you almost ready?” she asked Cattie, spooning her own bit of porridge.

Cattie nodded, swallowing the last of her porridge. “Yep, I just have to put my shoes on.”

Harry flicked his wrist and both Cattie’s shoes and his bag came flying down the stairs. Hermione was already wearing her shoes. The bag and shoes came through the door and landed on the table with a thump.

“Shoes off the table.” Hermione said, not even looking up from her food. Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly and grabbed his shoes. Cattie picked up her own.

“When can I start doing that?” she asked as she pulled on one of her green tennis shoes, the same color as the stripes on her green and white t-shirt which she wore under a pink hoodie.

“When *you* have learned a bit more about magic.” Harry answered her. He and Hermione had talked about it and decided it was better for her to start using magic sooner than when she was in school but they were going to wait until she had a bit more control of her magic. She tended to go a bit wild with her spells, hence the drapes.

Cattie pouted but pulled on her other shoe. She wasn't going to bother arguing about it...at least not right now. Harry and Hermione exchanged an amused look before Hermione went back to finishing her meal. She finished a few minutes later and they got ready to leave. The bowls disappeared off of the table and they left the dining room, Cattie skipping ahead of them excitedly, and headed to the family room. Hermione scooped up Cattie and grabbed a handful of floo powder before throwing it into the flames.

She turned to Harry before she stepped into the fire. "See you in a bit?"

He nodded. "See you." Cattie waved and Hermione stepped into the fireplace.

"St. Mungos!" and they were gone. Harry waited a few seconds before throwing his own handful of floo powder into the flames and stepping in.

"St. Mungos!" he quickly floored away. Hermione and Cattie were waiting for him when he stumbled out of the floo at St. Mungos. He ignored the people once again staring at him and took Hermione's hand. They made their way across the slightly crowded lobby and to the large oval desk. The receptionist, an olive skinned woman with short black hair, looked up from a roll of parchment and offered them a polite smile.

"Hello, is there anything I can do for you?" she asked brightly.

Hermione returned her smile. "Yes, we're here to visit Nymphadora Lupin?"

The woman nodded and swiveled around in her chair, turning to the giant disk behind her. She scanned it quickly before turning back to them.

"She's been moved to room 231, right down that corridor." She gestured down a hallway to the right of them.

Harry thanked her, flashing a quick smile before turning and heading down the corridor with his family. This hallway was different from the

one they had went down the day before; this one was a warm light brown and it was quite a bit busier than the last. People were walking up and down the hallway, coming in and out of the various rooms. The sound of voices, laughter, and baby cries were all around. They continued down the hallway looking for room 231 and after a bit of a walk they found it. On the door was the same kind of lights that were on the door of the delivery room, the large one was glowing a bright blue. Above the lights were the names 'Nymphadora J. Lupin' and under it 'Jackson S. Lupin'. Harry stepped forward and knocked.

"Come in!"

Harry pushed open the door and they stepped into the brightly lit room. Tonks was sitting on the bed with her back propped against the pillows, a bright smile of her rosy face. Malfoy was sitting close to her, leaning against her shoulder with Jackson cradled carefully in his arms. He was smiling but he was sitting stiffly, as if afraid he would drop the precious bundle in his arms. Remus and Ted Tonks were standing not far away in front of a table, talking. On the table were piles and piles of brightly wrapped packages along with stuffed animals in various sizes and colors, some with large bows on them and others proclaiming things like 'It's a boy!'. It was all very festive.

"Hello you three." Tonks greeted them, grinning. Malfoy glanced up quickly before looking back down at the baby in his arms. Remus stepped away from the table and walked over to them, pulling them each into a hug.

"Hey you guys, what brings you buy so early?" he asked as he released Cattie.

Hermione smiled. "We just wanted to see how you guys were doing."

Cattie stepped away from the group and quickly walked over to the bed where Tonks and Malfoy were still sitting. She climbed up on the bed, Tonks helping her up, so she could peer down at the baby in Malfoy's arms.

"Hello Jackie." She said softly. She looked up from him and to Malfoy. "Can I touch him?" she asked.

“Err, sure.” The teen shrugged, smiling slightly at the little girl. He pushed down the blanket down a bit and Cattie carefully reached in and gently touched the baby’s wispy strands of pale blonde hair.

“Hi Jack, I’m Cattie.”

Jackson yawned widely, blinking his large amber eyes up at the girl.

“You’re pretty cute.” She giggled.

“What’s all this?” Harry asked, gesturing to the pile of packages on the table.

Remus chuckled, shaking his head. “Gifts. We’ve been getting owls all day from all sorts of people, a lot of members of the Order.”

“And a lot of people I haven’t even seen since Hogwarts.” Tonks added. “We were just about to open them when you knocked.”

Hermione grinned. “Well then don’t let us stop you!”

Remus laughed and picked up a box at the very top of the pile, red with sparkling gold stars and a big gold bow. He perched himself on the edge of the bed and placed the box on his lap. There was a cushy couch against one wall and a chair near the bed. Harry was about to take the seat on the couch so Tonks’s father could sit in the chair but the man settled himself on the couch.

“Who’s it from?” Tonks asked, leaning her chin against his shoulder. He pulled a small card off of the ribbon.

“Minerva.” He said, surprised. He began carefully unwrapping the package, trying not to rip the paper. Tonks snorted and leaned forward, snatching the box out of his hands.

“That’s not how you open a present.” She immediately began ripping off the colorful paper. A white box was revealed. She pulled the top off of the box and peered inside. Inside the box, laying on a bed of white paper was a golden stuffed lion cub.

"How adorable!" Hermione exclaimed. It was a cute little thing with soft golden fur and humongous eyes. Another small card was inside the box. Tonks pulled it out.

"Here's hoping for another Gryffindor. Congratulations." She read. She snorted and Remus grinned.

"He will be." He said smugly.

"He *could* be a Hufflepuff." Tonks poked him on the side.

He patted her hand. "Of course dear." He said slowly. She poked him again, harder to stop his chuckling.

"You both are wrong, he could be a Slytherin." Malfoy smirked, readjusting his hold on the baby in his arms.

Remus shook his head vigorously. "Nope, there's no way."

Tonks exchanged a smirk with Malfoy. "Draco's right, *it* is in his blood after all."

"I'm never leaving him alone with either one of you." They all laughed and Remus went to grab another box. Just as he was reaching for it there was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" Tonks called. The door swung open and Andromeda Tonks stepped inside, a smile on her face and a small package wrapped in blue in one of her hands.

"Hello everyone." She greeted them. "Sorry I was gone so long, I had to pop home for Jack's gift." She walked over to the bed and kissed Tonks on the cheek before kissing her fingers and placing them lightly on Jackson's brow.

"You've come back just in time." Remus said, accepting his own kiss. "We were just opening gifts."

"Well open it up then!" she handed the box to Remus before sitting next to her husband. Tonks once again snatched the box from his hands and ripped into the paper. It was also a white box, about

palmed sized. This one also with paper, blue and carefully laid on the paper was a silver rattle. It was about the width of an adult's palm and rather simple looking, shaped like a dumbbell with a globe at the top and bottom. The length of silver connecting the two globes looked as if it had been twisted, giving it a spiral design. Engraved in loopy script on each globe were the initials J.S.L.

"I know it's not magical but we thought since you had one when you were a baby Jack should have one too." Ted said. "Of course you had the habit of throwing or dropping yours around whenever you could." He smiled.

"Thank you." Remus said sincerely, holding the rattle in his hands.

"It's beautiful." Tonks nodded, wiping the sudden moisture from her eyes.

Andromeda smiled warmly. "You're very welcome."

"Can I see it?" Cattie asked, surprising everyone. They had almost forgotten she was there, she had been surprisingly quiet for the past few minutes.

"Of course." Remus handed the rattle to the little girl who took it gently. She shook it and it made a soft jingling sound. She leaned over the baby, who was still being cradled by Malfoy and shook it again. Jackson's bright eyes flashed to it and he blinked up at the toy with obvious interest.

"I think he likes it." Cattie giggled.

They talked for an hour or so more, opening presents and laughing, until they began noticing Tonks yawning and blinking more and more as time went on. They had her on a lot of different potions to help her heal faster and they tired her out quite a bit. Jackson had fallen asleep quite some time ago and was now lying in a round cradle like thing with a shimmering, near transparent dome over it. The dome had been activated as soon as he was laid in the cradle, it was supposed to monitor his heart, breathing, and magic.

"We should be going." Harry said, standing up from his spot in the chair and checking his watch. It was nearly nine o'clock, they were going to be late for their meeting with Isabel Greythorn if they didn't leave soon. Hermione nodded, standing up herself.

"We'll come back and see you guys tomorrow." She said.

"We won't be here tomorrow." Tonks grinned. "We're going home tonight."

"After a checkup for Jack and Tonks." Remus added. Tonks waved a hand dismissively. She was obviously anxious to leave St. Mungos and get back home.

"Well then we'll come by the house then." Harry said. He leaned over to give Tonks a quick kiss on the cheek, Remus hugged him.

"We'll see you guys soon."

Hermione gave a hug to both Remus and Tonks and after Cattie said her goodbyes they left the room. They headed down the still bustling hallway and back into the bright lobby of St. Mungos. The receptionist waved at them as they passed the giant desk. Cattie returned her wave happily, smiling brightly. They continued across the lobby and to the fireplace. Whispers and eyes followed them the entire way, people were craning their necks to try and get a glimpse of the Potter family. Harry tried his best to ignore them and to stop himself from glaring at the nosey people but it was impossible. He had no doubt that by tomorrow pictures of them would be all over the Daily Prophet. Hermione picked up Cattie and took a handful of floo powder out of the large jar that was on top of the mantel.

"We'll see you in a bit." She said, squeezing his arm.

He smiled. "I'll be right behind you."

She gave one last squeeze to his arm before throwing in the floo powder and stepping inside. "Bye Daddy!" Cattie called just before she and her mother disappeared in a swirl of bright green flame. Harry waited a few seconds, still ignoring the eyes drilling into his

back before throwing in his own floo powder and stepping inside. In a second he was gone.

Hermione was helping Cattie out of her jacket when he made his way, rather ungracefully, out of the fireplace. Since there was no one to watch her while they were gone they had decided that Cattie would stay home while they went to meet with Isabel. This was something neither of them wanted to do. The cottage was probably the safest place she could possibly be but that didn't stop either of them from worrying about leaving her home with no one but the house elves. They trusted the elves of course but it wasn't the same as having one of them home with her. They couldn't risk bringing her with them though, Isabel's husband has seemed perfectly fine before but they didn't know what was waiting for them on Privet Drive. Italy had taught them well enough.

Harry took off his robes and flung them on the couch, running a hand through his hair. They had yet to talk to Cattie about it but he had no doubt that she was *not* going to be happy, not one little bit. He sighed and sat down next to his robe.

"Cattie love, we have something to talk to you about." Hermione said seriously.

Cattie frowned slightly, she could tell that this was going to be something serious. "What is it?"

"Come sit by me Kitty-Cat." Harry said, patting the spot next to him. The little girl complied, climbing up onto the couch and settling next to her father. Hermione sat on her other side. "We have somewhere to go today."

"Where are we going?" she asked excitedly. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look.

"Um, you father and I are going to meet someone. I'm afraid you're going to have to stay here."

The little girl's bright green eyes widened. "By-by *myself*?" she paled. "All alone?"

Hermione wrapped an arm around her small shoulders and hugged her slightly. "No, not all alone. DeeDi, Manny, and Molby are going to be here with you. They're going to keep you safe."

"How long are you going to be gone?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"Not long, we'll be back before you can even think to miss us." Harry assured her, giving her a reassuring smile.

Cattie bit her lip. "Promise?" she asked in a small voice. Hermione leaned over to kiss her forehead.

"We promise."

"And if you need us we'll be back like that." Harry added, snapping his fingers for emphasis.

"O-Ok, I'll be fine." She managed to give them a smile but they could both see the worry, the tiny bit of fear in her eyes. Harry ruffled her hair.

"That's my girl." He stood up. Hermione stood after him, her arm still around Cattie's shoulders. She pulled the little girl into a strong hug, kissing her on top of her head.

"Be good, ok? No magic while we're gone." She reminded her. Cattie sighed heavily and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"I *know*." She hugged Hermione again. "Bye Mum."

"Bye sweetheart."

Harry hugged her next, placing a sound kiss on her cheek, causing her to giggle. "Bye sweets, we'll be back soon."

"Bye Daddy."

"DeeDi!" Harry called when he had released his daughter. There was the familiar pop and the elf appeared in front of them.

"Yes Master Harry?" she smiled.

He returned her smile. "Hermione and I are going out for a little while and I was wondering if you could keep an eye on Cattie?"

The matronly elf nodded vigorously. "Of course! I'll keep an eye on the little Miss Catherine."

"Thank you very much DeeDi." Hermione thanked her sincerely. The elf blushed brightly and nodded.

"Is no problem at all Mistress Hermione."

They said another goodbye to Cattie and DeeDi before flooing away, Hermione first and Harry after her. He came out of the hearth at Grimmauld a few seconds after Hermione. Remus had assured them that it was perfectly fine for the two of them to use their house as a stopping point while they were still at St. Mungos, it still felt a bit weird though, like they were breaking in or something. They quickly made their way through the living room and to the front door. They were out the door and heading down the sidewalk in seconds. There was a slight chill in the air and the cloud was overcast and gray. Every once in a while a drop of moisture would fall from the sky, landing on Harry's head on face. He looked up at the gray sky and frowned. Hopefully this would be one of those quick rainfalls and they would be stuck in a storm. More drops began to fall and Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and they sped up. They made it to the alley just as the rain really began falling. It wasn't raining hard but they would still get soaked. Hermione must have been thinking along the same lines as he because she flicked her wrist and cast a quick water repelling charm on their clothing and Harry's glasses.

"Thank you." He grinned.

She returned his smile. "You're welcome."

Harry reached into his bag and pulled out the bike. He restored it to its original size, pulled out the helmets and handed one to Hermione. He pulled his on and swung onto the bike, Hermione soon after. As soon as they were both seated he pulled out of the alley way and sped down the street. The helmets must've also been charmed to repel water because not a drop obscured his vision as a matter of fact everything look clearer, as if it wasn't raining at all.

“Do you think Cattie’s going to be ok?” He asked Hermione through the helmets.

He felt her nod against his back. “She’ll be fine. No one knows exactly where the cottage is, it’s the safest place for her to be right now.”

“I just hope this is as simple as it looks.” He sighed. He wasn’t sure he could take running into any death eaters again, not so soon.

“Me too.”

A while later they were once again on Privet Drive. It was already after twelve o’clock by then and the rain had slowed to a drizzle. They slowly passed number four, Harry winced when he saw Vernon’s car parked in the driveway, the bright red car parked next to it. He had been hoping that they would get lucky and the Dursely’s wouldn’t be home. He could only pray that they wouldn’t have another run in with his “relatives”. They continued down the empty street, the wheels of the bike making barely a sound on the rain slicked street. Harry pulled into the Greythorn’s driveway next to the luxury car and another sedan. It looked like Mrs. Greythorn was home. He cut the engine and Hermione got off of it first, he stepped off after her. She handed him her helmet and he put them both in the compartment.

“Ready?” he asked the brown haired woman next to him.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Ready.”

She took his hand and together they strode across the driveway and to the front door. Harry stepped closer to the door and rung the bell. They waited. While they waited for someone to answer their ring Harry took a good look at the house. At first he had thought that it looked exactly like all the others in the neighborhood, since individuality of any kind seemed to be against some kind of law, but when you took a closer look at this house you could see the differences. Unlike the close cut lawns of the other houses the grass in front of the Greythorn home was high, probably reaching your ankle. Flowers of all different colors lined their walkway and wind chimes were hanging in front of their doorway. Above their door was

a wooden plaque with the words 'Run while you can!'. He was just about to point it out to Hermione when the door swung open.

Standing in the doorway was a tall woman, taller than Harry. She was built like a runner with strong arms and legs they could see from her white button up shirt, which was rolled up to her elbows, and baggy khaki shorts. Her skin was browned by the sun. She had black hair, streaked with silver that was pulled into a ponytail. Thick bangs shielded her high forehead and she had wide, dark brown eyes. Her nose was rather long and her mouth was a bit too wide but something about her was very pretty. She smiled when she saw them, showing bright white teeth.

"You must be Harry and Hermione." She said. "My husband said you came by looking for me."

Hermione nodded, smiling politely. "Yes we did, we wanted to speak with you about something."

"Well come in out of the rain, I'll make us some tea." She stepped back and gestured for them to come inside. After a quick glance between one another they stepped inside the house. They were instantly greeted by warmth and the smell of spices and...pine? "Follow me." She led them down the hallway and to her living room. The house was painted in various shades of red with honey colored wood flooring. Everywhere they looked they could see brightly colored paintings and sculptures everywhere. Large oriental rugs covered huge parts of the floor and potted plants covered nearly every available surface. In the living room there were at least four shelves and the mantle of the fireplace covered with small, beautifully crafted wooden figurines. They were shaped into animals, people, flowers, everything you could think of in all different kinds of woods. Above the figurines on the wall were hundreds of pictures of what Harry could only guess was the Greythorn family.

"Please have a seat." She said, gesturing to a large dark red couch in the center of the room. They sat. In front of the couch was a dark wood coffee table carved with a humongous dragon on the sides, the dragon's feet the legs of the table; on top of the table was a tea set. Isabel Greythorn walked over to the tea set and pulled out a wand.

Both Harry and Hermione tensed at this but she just tapped the tea pot, saying the incantation under her breath, and steam began to rise out of the tea pot.

“So, what brings Harry Potter and Hermione Granger to my home?” she asked as she poured three cups of tea. She glanced up at their surprised faces, smirking a bit. “I may live in the muggle world but I am not out of touch with my magical side. I read the Daily Prophet and you’re not exactly hard to recognize Mr. Potter.” She looked pointedly at the scar displayed prominently on his head.

Hermione leaned forward, clasping her hands on top of her knees. “Well,” she cleared her throat. “We’re here to ask you about a tea cup you may have purchased a few years ago.”

The woman was silent for a second. She took a long sip of her tea and nodded. “You mean Hufflepuff’s tea cup?” she looked up and met their eyes. “Yes, I purchased it.”

Harry could feel his excitement rising. “May we see it?” he asked, trying to keep but failing to keep the excited and anxious quality out of his voice. The woman looked away from them for a second before shaking her head, biting her lip. Harry felt something cold, like dread, in his stomach and he swallowed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have it.”

A/N: I told myself I was going to be nice and not leave a cliffhanger in this chapter but I couldn’t help myself! It was too good an opportunity. Little Jackson has finally been born which I’m happy about, I’ve been waiting for ages to write this chapter. I hope you all enjoyed it! Anyway, thank you all for reading and for your great reviews, even if I don’t answer them all I greatly appreciate them. The next chapter will be up soon!

Chapter 31

"Wh-what do you mean you don't have it?" He asked.

She ran a hand through her dark hair. "I bought the cup as a gift for my mother."

"Does she still have it?" Hermione asked. Isabel sighed and sank into one of the armchairs in front of the large couch. A look of sadness crossed her face.

"I-I don't know. I haven't seen her in almost six years." She sighed. "I bought the cup five and a half years ago at an auction in Diagon Alley. They used to frequently host events at the Ministry where they would auction off historical magical objects." She shook her head. "A ridiculous thing to do. Anyway I spent quite a bit on that cup; it was a beautiful little thing. You see my grandmother always said that our family was descended from Helga Hufflepuff and my mother always believed her even if the rest of the family thought she was bit off her nut. I believed her too."

"What was your grandmother's name?" Hermione interrupted.

"Joanna Fortescue."

This surprised them both.

"Any relation to Florean Fortescue?" Harry asked.

Isabel nodded. "Yes, she married his uncle Garvin Fortescue. Her maiden name was Smith."

Hermione nodded at this. The Smith's were known descendants of Hufflepuff.

The woman took another sip of her tea and continued her story. "It was a few days before her birthday and I thought it would be the perfect gift." She spit out the words bitterly, her eyes filling with moisture. "I gave her the cup and to say she was ecstatic would be an understatement. She was so *happy*; I thought it was the best gift I

could've ever given her. I was wrong. A couple of months ago I went to visit her. Every Saturday I would go to her house and we'd have tea, talk, laugh, and just spend time together but this time." She shook her head again. "This time I just-I just *couldn't find it*. It was like the house had disappeared, gone of the face of the earth. I just couldn't understand why I could find it; she'd lived in the same house for the past sixty years. It isn't- *wasn't* that far from here, I grew up there but when I went down the road which I *knew* lead to the house....there was nothing but trees. A dead end. It was like the forest had grown over the road completely but how could that happen in a few days?" she didn't even seem to be speaking to them anymore. Her hands were clenched around her tea cup, turning her knuckles white and the moisture had leaked out of her eyes. "We're trying everything, we've even tried going through the trees on foot but we just can't find it and the forest...there's something wrong with that place." She shuddered. "None of us could stand being there for more than a few minutes." She put down her cup, tea sloshing over its sides, and stood up, walking over to the fireplace. She turned her back to them and took a deep breath before turning back. "That cup was the cause of this. I know it. I wish I had never bought it."

The room was silent. Harry and Hermione exchanged a pained glance. They were of course sympathetic to the loss of Isabel's mother, it was a terrible thing but the one thing that horrified them the most was the fact that now the cup could be lost.

"I'm so sorry." Hermione said sincerely. Harry nodded in agreement, eyes full of sympathy. Isabel forced a thankful smile to the young couple but her bottom lip was trembling and the tears were still leaking from her eyes. Harry spotted a strange looking tissue box on a round table near the couch, it was a red box etched with pictures of rather large nude women. He fished out a tissue and leaned over to hand it to the woman.

"Thank you." She said tearfully, taking the tissue. She dabbed at her eyes and again took her seat across from them. "I apologize. I didn't mean to get so emotional." She chuckled once, a mirthless sound. She sniffled quickly and wiped the remaining moisture from her face.

Harry shook his head. "No need to apologize, we understand." Hermione bit her lip and she and Harry once again exchanged a glance.

"Um, I'm really sorry to have to ask you this but I was wondering if you could give us directions to where your mother's home was?"

Isabel's brows furrowed and she peered at them with a strange expression. She frowned. "I told you, the place is impossible to find."

"We understand that we just...we have to see for ourselves. It's very important." Harry said seriously, meeting her eyes. The older woman kept his gaze, as if searching for his true intentions. Her lips tightened every so slightly but she nodded on, jerkily, and stood up from her chair. She walked over to a jade roll top desk and opened it. She reached inside, pulled out a small wooden box and browsed through a selection of white cards before pulling out one. She replaced the box, closed the desk and stepped back over to them. She silently handed the card to Hermione, her face dark.

"Thank you." Hermione said quietly. Isabel nodded once, her face softened. Before they could speak again the sound of the front door opening reached their ears. Isabel sniffed softly and quickly wiped her eyes, turning to the doorway just as a boy walked through. He had to be about eight or nine years old. He had Isabel's dark hair and her husband's bright blue eyes. Looking at some of the pictures above the mantel this was her son.

His hair was mussed and there were sticks in it, as if he had been rolling on the ground. His shirt was torn and there was a hole in the backpack he was clutching in his arms. A bruise was rapidly forming around one of his bright eyes and others decorated his face. Blood was running from his nose and his lip was split. He was blinking rapidly, obviously trying not to cry.

"Bradley!" Isabel gasped, rushing over to the boy's side. "What happened?!"

He shook his head, biting his lip and causing more blood to bubble out of the wound. Isabel raised her hand and carefully touched a livid

bruise on his freckled cheek and the boy winced. Her eyes darkened with anger.

"Did that Dursley boy do this to you?" she hissed.

Bradley swallowed and shook his head quickly, his bloodied lips quivering. "N-No. I fell."

Isabel placed a gentle hand on each side of the boy's face, looking into his eyes. "Bradley John, don't lie to me. Tell me what happened."

"I was walking home from Ben's house and I was by the park when Dudley and his friends told me to give 'em all my money but I didn't have any and I told him so but they didn't believe me and they took my bag and they broke it and they didn't find any money so they-they started hitting me." He gasped out, his words tumbling out faster and faster the more he spoke. He was trying hard not to cry but the moisture was beginning to spill from his wide, bruised eyes.

"It's ok sweetheart." Isabel hushed him, her voice soothing but her eyes were burning with barely suppressed rage. She pulled the boy a bit closer to her side and pulled out her wand. She waved it over Bradley's face, muttering an incantation under her breath. The cuts on his face slowly began to heal and the bruises began to fade. Blood was still dried on his freckled face but his wounds had healed. Isabel kissed him on the cheek. "There you go, love. Why don't you head on upstairs and get cleaned up?"

His sniffled, rubbing his nose on his arm. "Ok mum." He gathered his ripped bag closer to his chest and shuffled out of the room. A bit later they heard him slowly making his way up the stairs. As soon as she was sure Bradley had made his way up the stairs Isabel whirled around, teeth clenched and eyes bright. Her cheeks were flushed with anger.

"That-that little..." she was so furious she couldn't even force the words out. Harry was angry himself. How could Dudley beat up on a *kid*? Who was he kidding; Dudley had always made it his business to pick on anyone smaller than him. He clenched his fists. Oh he was *definitely* going to get him back for this. For Bradley and for himself.

“How long has Dudley been picking on Bradley?” He asked.

“You know him?” Isabel asked, brows raised in surprise.

Harry smiled, lips twisted in anything but happiness. “Oh yes, better than I’d like to.”

Isabel gave him a strange look but she answered his question. “It started a little over a week after we moved in which was only a month or so ago. For a while Brad refused to tell either his father or me what was going on, he’d just come home with all kinds of bruises and no explanations. One day he came home and he was really beaten. His nose was broken, his ankle was sprained, and one of his eyes had been blackened. We sat him down and he finally told us what was going on and who was hurting him. We were of course angry, absolutely furious. We tried to talk to the Dursley’s but they couldn’t believe their pig of a son could do something like that.” She scoffed. “John and that Vernon fellow really got into it and it ended with Dursley having a broken nose. Luckily we were able to get out of there before the great oaf thought to sit on John and crush him to death. They had to be two of the most ignorant people I have ever had the misfortune to meet.”

“Believe me, there are very few people who are even near their level of ignorance.” Harry snorted. They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. Harry couldn’t think of what else they could possibly ask Isabel and he was anxious to leave. He wanted to get searching for the cup as soon as possible, and of course pay a little visit to the Durselys. Hermione must have had the same thought as he because she began to speak.

“Well, thank you for your time Isabel, we really appreciate you helping us.” She stood and Harry got to his feet after her.

“I’m not sure how much help I was.” The older woman responded, her eyes still sad with the memories of her lost mother. “But I wish you luck with whatever it is you’re doing.”

Harry smiled. “Thank you.”

She led the couple to the front door and opened it. Before they stepped out of the house she turned and looked over them silently. Her eyes were intense as they bore into Harry and Hermione, searching for something. After a tense second she looked away from them and out the door, her eyes distant.

"If you...if you find anything please let me know." She said softly. Hermione placed a hand gently on her arm.

"We will."

Without another word she and Harry stepped out of the house. The door closed with a soft click behind them. They walked in silence to the bike which was still in the exact spot they had left it, the sun glinting off of the shining chrome.

"Do you think Voldemort did anything to Isabel's mother?" Harry asked as he retrieved their helmets from the compartment. He kept his voice low on the off chance that one of the many nosey neighbors were hiding behind their fences listening in.

"I don't know but there's a good chance he did." Hermione sighed, taking the helmet he offered her. "One thing I do know is that Mr. Fortescue's disappearance has something to do with this." She shook her head. "It's just too much of a coincidence for it not to be."

Harry sighed heavily. "I have a feeling nothing good is going to come from all of this. When do you think we should go looking for the house?"

"I think we should get this over with as soon as possible." Hermione answered firmly.

"Today then?"

"Today."

They put on their helmets and swung onto the bike. They were soon out of the Greythorn's driveway and headed back the way they came. Instead of speed up when the Dursley home came into view, as he

had done the last time, Harry slowed the bike. The driveway was now empty, both cars gone.

“Harry...” Hermione’s voice warned in his ear. “What are you doing?”

He pulled the bike a bit back from the driveway so it was hidden behind a tree and he cut the engine. “What kind of nephew would I be if I didn’t stop to visit my dear family?” he pulled off his helmet and was getting off of the bike before she had a chance to rebuke him. She hurriedly pulled off her own helmet and scrambled off after him.

“Harry.” She hissed.

He took the helmet from her hands and stored it away next to his in the compartment.

“Look ‘Mione, I have to do this.” He said firmly. She pressed her lips together and nodded stiffly.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

A smirk slowly crept onto his face, a mischievous twinkle in his emerald eyes. Without answering he turned and crept towards the side of the house, bending slightly as to not be seen through the windows. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Hermione following after him. They continued on their way, Harry glancing up through the windows every once in a while to see if he could spot any one of his ‘relatives’. He didn’t know what exactly he was going to do but he couldn’t just leave without getting a *bit* of revenge. At every window, when he didn’t see anyone in a room, he would flick his wrist and cast a charm, his smirk widening more and more every time. Hermione didn’t ask what spells he was casting but a smile had made its way onto her face and she was beginning to cast her own spells. Neither told the other what spells they were casting but by the time they had crossed to the back of the house they were both trying very hard to stifle their giggles. They continued looking through the windows and casting spells and soon they reached the kitchen. As they crouched in the dirt, Hermione having to hold her hands over the mouth to keep her laughter in and Harry nearly biting a hole in his lip. He gripped the windowsill and peered through the glass and his laughter abruptly stopped. Standing in the kitchen, taking a sheet of

biscuits out of the oven, was Aunt Petunia. Her back was to the window and her head was down as she moved the biscuits from the sheet to a cooling rack.

"I was beginning to think no one was home." Hermione murmured, watching the woman place the cookies on the rack.

"Well," Harry grinned. "it does make things a bit more interesting." He moved a bit closer to the window, eyes narrowing, he raised a hand. With a flick of his fingers and a wave of his wrist the chocolate biscuits began to rise from the rack. At first Petunia didn't notice her freshly baked food floating about in the air until they began to float around her head. She looked up and screamed, the sound muted from behind the glass but still screeching. The spatula dropped from her grasp and her hands flew into the air, trying to bat away the biscuits orbiting her head. She was hopping around the kitchen now, eyes closed and hands wildly flying about, the biscuits following her the entire way. Harry was nearly choking on his laughter, fists actually stuffed in his mouth to keep it in. Hermione had tears pooling in her eyes, laughing silently.

She gasped for breath. "My turn." She moved closer to the window and did a quick wave of her fingers. The cookies suddenly stopped orbiting over Petunia, who was now trying to scramble onto the table to escape the floating biscuits. Though the cookies had stopped moving Petunia was still screaming, staring with wide eyes at the cookies. Nothing happened. Petunia slowly opened one eye and her screams slowly began to lessen in volume when she saw the cookies had stopped their movements. Harry frowned, he doubted Hermione's spell had failed but the cookies were now doing nothing more than floating there. He was just about to ask her what was going on when Aunt Petunia opened her other eye. As soon as she did the biscuits suddenly began pelting her. Her screams returned, increasing in volume and her hands flew to try and cover her head as she pressed herself against the table. The biscuits began tangling in her hair, sprinkling her face with bits of chocolate and crumbs. Harry was laughing so hard he lost his balance and fell to the ground. Hermione was gasping for breath, face red with the strain of trying to keep from laughing too loudly. Harry was so focused on his laughter he almost didn't hear the sound of a car crunching on the gravel of

the driveway. As soon as he recognized the sound his laughter abruptly stopped. He shuffled a bit away from the window and peered around the corner of the house to the driveway. An obviously expensive car pulled into the driveway, parked, and the doors opened. Harry eyes narrowed and his teeth clenched when two rather large forms stepped out. Vernon and Dudley. Harry frowned in confusion, he thought the Dursley's had bought Dudley his own car?

"It's Vernon and Dudley." He whispered to Hermione, inching his way back over to her and the kitchen window. She nodded, frowning. She looked back at Petunia, the cookies still carrying out their attack, and flicked her wrist. The cookies stopped their movements, flew from the woman and back to the rack where they neatly arranged themselves, looking as if they had never been disturbed. With another flick of her wrist the kitchen was returned to its pristine condition, the only thing that looked as if it had been disturbed was Petunia. Her hair was mussed, her face was streaked with chocolate and tears and mascara, and she was still huddled on top of the table. She didn't dare move from her spot on the table, her eyes were wide and glued to the biscuits as if she expected them to jump up and begin attacking her again. She stayed on the table even as the front door opened and Vernon and Dudley's obnoxiously loud voices filled the house.

"They came out of nowhere, Dad! I was just minding my own business when that police car swerved in front of me and just stopped! They were going too slow and I couldn't stop! It was *their* fault." Dudley's loud, whining voice was easily heard through the panes of glass. "They totaled my car, Dad! I want a new one."

"And you will get one son." Vernon was heard next. "We will sue the entire force, the government, *they* will pay for you a new car!" the kitchen door swung open and the great hulk of a man strode in, Dudley squeezing his way in behind him.

"Do you hear that Petunia?! A policeman stopped his car in front of Dudley and *totaled* his car! The brand new car we just bought for him! Can you be-" he abruptly stopped speaking when he spotted his disheveled wife huddled on top of the dining room table, covered in cookie crumbs and bits of chocolate and with a terrified expression on

her face. "Petunia! What're you doing?" he exclaimed, blinking at her with wide eyes.

"Th-the b-biscuits." She stammered, pointing a shaking finger at the innocent looking platter of biscuits. Vernon's expression faded from shock to confusion and he began edging closer to the table, eyes darting from the platter to his wife. Dudley paid no mind to his parents, he waddled over to the platter of cookies and grabbed a handful, stuffing them into his great maw of a mouth, crunching noisily.

"These are *cold*." He whined but still continuing to reach for another handful. Harry, from his perch outside the window, sneered at his cousin. It was amazing how even after all these years, as old as he was, Dudley still managed to whine like an overgrown baby.

"They were-they were *flying*!" Petunia burst out, turning and grabbing the front of Vernon's shirt in a vice like grip, her eyes wild. "They were attacking me!" With surprisingly worried eyes Vernon placed his meaty hands on her shoulders.

"The...*biscuits* were attacking you?" he asked slowly.

"Yes! They were floating...like-like...magic." As soon as the word left her mouth there was a silence. Dudley's mouth dropped open, the half chewed mess in his mouth clearly visible. Vernon's face first paled then began to turn purple. His hands fell from Petunia's thin shoulders and they clenched at his side. Even from outside the throbbing vein in his neck was visible.

"The boy." He hissed, the hatred very clear in his voice and in his eyes. "*He* had something to do with this, I know it. If that little son of a bitch ever shows his face here again..." his hands flew up to wring the air, as if he was imagining wrapping his fingers around someone's neck. A smile grew on Harry's face, the expression anything but pleasant. He narrowed his eyes and lifted his hand. With a twitch of his fingers all of a sudden the faucet on the kitchen sink came on. Petunia jumped, shrieking. Dudley glanced at the sink with disinterest before grabbing another handful of biscuits. With a confused scowl Vernon stepped away from the table and his terrified wife, walking over to the sink and beginning to turn the knob. The flow of water

didn't stop. His scowl deepened and he turned the knob harder; the water still continued to flow.

"Damn thing!" he shouted, now using both hands. He turned the knob so hard that his knuckles turned white, his teeth were clenched, and his large round face was turning a bright red. He let out a mighty grunt and turned with all his might. Once again, nothing happened. The anger now quite clear on his face, curses spilling from his mouth, he made to try again but as he reached for the knob the water suddenly arched up and hit him square in the face. "Arrgh!" he roared. Harry flicked his fingers again and the force of the water intensified, pushing Vernon back and into the table, strong enough to bowl him over it and send him careening to the floor, Petunia ending up sliding off after him. She screamed and crawled away from the gushing water, now looking a true mess.

"Dudley." Vernon managed to gasp out as he struggled to escape the torrent of water. "Tu-" another gasp "Turn." A sputter. "It off!"

Since the water had begun gushing at his father Dudley had been standing near the rack of cookies, obviously in shock. He spurred into action at his father's words, jumping and moving to the sink. He struggled with the knob, pulling and pulling to try and shut off the flow of water but it didn't move. He was gasping and grunting, he braced his feet against the cabinet and clenching his teeth he pulled with all his might. It broke. The knob flew from his hands, smacking into the wall, and Dudley fell to the ground. The broken knob rolled across the floor and bumped into his leg, laying innocently on the tile. All Dudley could do was stare dumbly at it.

"Dudley!" Vernon shouted over the water and Petunia's all too high pitched shrieks. The large teen tried to scramble to his feet but by now the floor was soaked and he kept slipping. He grabbed the edge on the countertop and finally pulled himself to his feet. He had to keep his hold on the counter because his feet kept trying to slip out from under him. He inched his way back over to the sink.

"What exactly does he plan on doing?" Hermione giggled.

Harry was laughing too hard to answer.

Hermione suddenly smirked and she lifted her hand, making a series of gestures. "Can't let you have all the fun can I?" she muttered as her fingers moved. The doors to the wall cabinets flew open and boxes upon boxes of snack cakes, cookies, cereal, and packages and bags of other things, flew from the cabinets and at the teen. He screamed and swatted the air with one hand, just as his mother had, and his other clutching his bottom. Cereal and other things were spilling onto the floor, mixing with the water and making a great, multi-colored, soggy mess. Since he had released his supporting hold on the counter Dudley didn't stay standing for long. He slipped, slid across the floor and into a wall. The boxes continued attacking him, covering him with food as he howled and tried to bat them away. Petunia had pressed herself as far into the corner as she could. Her makeup was running down her face, her hair was a right mess, and her clothes were slowly beginning to get soaked by the water all over her kitchen floor. She was sobbing and mouthing 'My kitchen'. The words were easily read on her lips as she repeated them over and over again. Vernon had managed to crawl a few inches on his stomach but the water was still bearing down on him, he looked like a humongous drowned rat. They all looked quite a mess.

"I think it's time to have a talk with my relatives." Harry said cheerfully, standing. He reached out a hand to Hermione to help her to her feet. They walked from the back of the house, making their way to the front door. Hermione waved her hand over the knob, performing a quick unlocking spell and pushed open the door. With all the casualness of those that belonged in the house the couple strolled down the hallway and into the kitchen. It was worse than it had looked from outside. The floor was a complete mess, bits of brightly colored, soggy cereal were floating around, and squished snack cakes still in their cellophane wrappers were also floating about in the water. The Dursleys were in a terrible state, sodden, covered in bits of food, and Vernon was still being pummeled by the gush of water from the sink. For a second Harry felt sorry for them then Vernon caught sight of them.

"You!" he sputtered from under the flow. "I-I knew it was you!"

Harry crossed his arms, smiling widely. "Me? What would make you think I would do such a thing?" he flicked his fingers and the water

shut off. Face purple with rage Vernon gripped the edge of the table and pulled himself to his stumbling feet, sloshing the water about. Water was dripping from his moustache and his hair stuck to his forehead in sopping wet, greasy strands. With a growl he made to step threateningly over to Harry. The affect was ruined by the fact that his clothes were plastered to his body and bits of cereal were stuck to the side of his face.

"I am going to throttle your head right off of you *neck*." He spat, jowls jiggling, water dripping down his beet red face.

Harry sighed with mock sadness, shaking his head. "I don't think I can allow that Uncle Vernon. Please, take a seat." With a flick of Harry's wrist an overturned dining chair was righted and Vernon was pushed back into it, the chair slid across the floor and slammed jarringly into the wall. "Thank you." He stepped farther into the room, water sloshing over his shoes. Hermione tucked a stray curl and behind an ear and leaned against the doorframe, crossing her arms. She glared at the Dursley's, a frown on her face. She felt no sympathy from them, not after Harry told her all they had done to him. Starving him, locking him in a cupboard, and though he had never exactly said it she knew that there was no way that a man like Vernon would stop at starvation and imprisonment. No, she could hold no sympathy for someone who would hurt a child. Whatever Harry felt like dishing out she would stand behind him and maybe even give a little herself.

"Nice to see you all again. Now," Harry threaded his fingers together. "I have a few things to discuss with you."

"W-What do you want from us?" Petunia sobbed.

"Like I said, I just want to discuss a few things with you." He clasped his hands behind his back. "First, I think I deserve an apology-"

"Apology?!" Vernon spat, interrupting him. "We have nothing to apologize to *you* for! We spent years wasting food, clothes, and space on you! You should be thanking us! We fed you, clothed you, and put a roof over your head, your lucky we didn't throw you in an orphanage!"

By the time the man had finished his little tirade Harry's face had lost every pretence of civility. He was glaring with open hatred at Vernon, his hands clenched white at his side.

"You did what?" he hissed. The temperature in the room dropped. Vernon froze when he saw the look on his face and Petunia let out a strangled gasp. His face held no expression, except for his eyes. They were narrowed and had darkened to a near black, a cold fury was practically radiated from his gaze. "You starved me, forced me to wear your whale of a son's gigantic clothes, and locked me in a *cupboard*. I probably would've been better off if you had left me to an orphanage." He turned his dark gaze to Petunia. "And *you*...what would you sister think of you now?" he spat. "Do you think she would've ever treated Dudley the way you treated me if you had died? No, she wouldn't have. She would've treated him like her own." Petunia flinched at his words, every little bit of color fleeing her face. She gaped at him and he wondered if she had ever thought of that before. He doubted it. He stared at her a moment longer before looking away, a clear look of disgust on his face, and over to Dudley who seemed to be trying to slink down and make himself small. It didn't work.

"Dudley." Harry shook his head in mock sadness, tsking. "I've heard you're still up to your old tricks. Beating up on little kids? I mean *really*, how pathetic can you get?" he slowly began walking over to the bigger boy and Dudley began to pale. His tiny eyes darted here and there as if looking for some sort of escape. The look on Harry's was anything but friendly. His eyes were a dark green and there was a dangerous glint in them, his lips were twisted into a mocking smile and he practically radiated power. He was in complete control. For the first time Dudley wasn't just scared of the magic Harry could do, he was terrified of Harry himself.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Dudley flinched when he spoke and he swallowed hard, pressing his back even harder into the chair as his cousin drew closer. "I-I don't know what you're talking a-about." He stammered out, eyes still darting.

“Really?” Harry drawled. “Tell me Dudley, do you know a Bradley? I’m sure you do.” He leaned close to the quivering, pale boy. His eyes bored into his watery blue ones. “You see, he and his family are *friends* of our.” He let the implication hang in the air and if possible Dudley paled even more, a tinge of green coming onto his face. “If you ever touch him or any other kid in the neighborhood I’ll know and I’ll be back. This-” he waved a hand at the mess around them, not taking his eyes off of the boy. “is nothing compared to what I’ll do to you if I find out you, or your gang, has put you piggy little paws on another kid. Do you understand me?” Dudley nodded hastily, pieces of cereal dropping wetly from his hair to his shirt. The promise was very clear in Harry’s eyes. He understood.

Harry kept his gaze burning into his, making sure to get his point across, before straightening and stepping back.

“Good.” For a second he just looked over them in silence, an unidentifiable expression on his face. As he looked at them memories of his childhood, a lot he had tried very hard to forget, circled though his mind. All the times he had been shoved into the cupboard, ‘accidentally’ pushed into walls or tripped, denied food, yelled at, cursed, ridiculed, treated like nothing more than dirt. He remembered how when he was very young he used to try so *hard* to be good, to do whatever they said to maybe make them like him, to treat him like he was worth something. It had never worked of course, if anything it made them treat him worse. By the time he was six he had figured out that no matter what he did, these people would *never* treat him like a part of the family. He clenched his hands tightly and he felt a hot rush of anger rushing through him, a pure *hatred*. He had never felt anything like it. With just a flick of his wrist he could...he shook the thought away quickly. He had to get out of here, he had to get away from these people before he did something he would regret.

“There is so much I could do to you with nothing more than a thought, I could get back at you for every thing you have ever done to me but you’re not even worth it.” He said coldly. “You know what? I don’t need an apology from you.” Vernon opened his mouth as if to say something but a quick, fearful look from his wife silenced him. Harry ignored them both. “You’re pathetic. Spending years blaming all your problems on a child.” He sneered. “I pity you. After all the years of

you treating me like dirt, trying to make me feel worthless I finally understand what it was all about. You're jealous. Jealous because you always knew that in the end I would be better than you, I would be better than all of this and looking at you now I know that I am. I have so much more than you." He looked over at Hermione, his eyes softening. She was hanging back, allowing him to have this closure. She knew he needed it. He gave her a grateful look, hoping to convey just how thankful he was to her before looking back at the three seated people. For the first time in his life he really saw them. They were sad, shallow, and in the end they had nothing. They didn't have a grain of what he had and he truly felt pity for them. "I can thank you though. Thanks to you I know what a real family is and it definitely isn't this. Our daughter will never know anything of a life like this."

"You...you have a daughter?" Petunia asked, looking between him and Hermione. Her voice was so quiet he had barely heard her. He looked at her. She looked so...broken, a sadness he had never seen or expected to ever see was in her eyes. Maybe she had thought these things before. For a second he felt a very small pang of guilt but it was quickly smothered. She needed to hear it.

"Yes we do and luckily she will never know any of you." He crossed his arms. "It was nice to see you all, let's hope this never has to happen again." Without another look at them he turned and strode out of the room. Before following him Hermione turned to the Dursleys.

"Harry may show you mercy but I've seen what you've done to him and if you step one toe out of line I'll be back and I won't be so kind."

And they were gone.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Hermione asked softly as they stepped outside. He was staring at the sky, a faraway look on his eyes. He was pale and obviously very tense. After she closed the door behind her she placed a hand on his arm and he sagged.

"I...I'm fine." He forced a smile, reaching over to give the hand on his arm a gentle squeeze. "Let's just get out of here."

He had thought that once he had finally gotten some kind of revenge on the Dursley's he would feel some sort of relief but if anything it just made him feel...sad. He wasn't sure if he was sad for them or for himself.

In silence they walked away from the house and over to the hidden bike. They retrieved their helmets, put them on, swung onto the bike and in seconds they were speeding down the quiet neighbor street. Never once did Harry look back. That part of his life was over.

"Well this is...interesting." Harry said to Hermione, pulling the bike to a stop. They had been on the road for a bit over fifteen maybe twenty minutes when Hermione spotted a sign with the street name that was written on the piece of piece of paper.

The road took them down what looked like a very old neighborhood. It had a single cobble street lined with beautiful brownstones and carefully manicured trees with little fences around them. All around the neighborhood was a forest, kept back from houses by a high brick fence. It would've seemed perfectly normal if it wasn't for what looked like a giant wall of trees cutting off the street. It looked completely and utterly out of place. The forest that surrounded the neighborhood seemed to have overgrown it's boundaries and taken over half of the neighborhood.

A few people, muggles it seemed like, strolled down the sidewalks, walking dogs and chatting with one another but none of them seemed to take any notice of the forest directly in the middle of their neighborhood.

"There must be a charm on it to keep the muggles from noticing, like Hogwarts." Hermione murmured thoughtfully through the helmet.

"I guess we know where we're going at least." He put the bike back into gear, slowly driving towards the imposing wall of trees.

The people on the sidewalks glanced at them curiously as they drove down the road but the closer and closer they got to the forest the less anyone looked at them. By the time they were a few feet from it the

people seemed to have forgotten their very existence. As they drew nearer to the tree line a thick, ominous silence fell all around them. The sounds of people and the surrounding city completely disappeared. There was no sound coming from the forest in front of them, not the call of a bird, the rustle of leaves, nothing. Harry cut the engine and squinted, leaning forward slightly, trying to see into the forest but the only thing he could see past the trunks in front of them was utter and complete darkness. He glanced over his shoulder, past Hermione, at the oblivious neighborhood. It was like two completely different worlds. He felt Hermione shift behind him and climb off of the bike.

“Come on Harry.” There was a slight tremor in her voice and he couldn’t blame her. Darkness and malevolence exuded from the forest and he could feel eyes on him, as if something was watching them from the trees. He swallowed hard and climbed off of the bike. There was no use delaying the inevitable. They stowed the helmets and Harry’s bag. He shrunk the bike and shoved it in his pocket. They stepped closer to the forest and stood, not entering.

“You ready?” Harry asked, meeting her eyes quickly before looking back at the forest.

“No. Let’s go.”

They stepped into the trees. They were plunged into darkness. The sun was completely blocked in the forest and a thick fog drifted through the air. The trees were towering and skeletal, the few leaves on their blackened branches withered and dead. The soil was compacted and cracked and tufts of sickly looking grass grew in patches. There was no sign of life anywhere, not even an insect crawled on the ground. It was worse than the Forbidden Forest. Hermione did a quick ‘lumos’ and a small ball of light glowed in her hand. Harry followed her example. The light barely lit the area around them, all they could see was a foot or two in front of them. Harry *did not* like this.

“Er, which way do we go?” he whispered. It seemed like a very bad idea to speak too loudly. He didn’t see anyone but he couldn’t shake the feeling that someone or something was watching them.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, trying to scan for some kind of path or something but she could barely see past her own nose. She stretched out her arm to spread the beam of light a bit further but it helped nothing. There was no clear trail. All around them was nothing more than the closely grown trees and the fog.

"I don't know." She answered, whispering also. "I guess we should just start walking?" she didn't look like she much enjoyed that idea but really, what else were they supposed to do?

Harry nodded, eyes darting nervously around them. "We can only get hopelessly lost, starve to death, and end up as much needed fertilizer for these trees. We'll go straight then." He didn't even have to look at her to know she rolled her eyes.

"We'll mark the trees as a trail so we don't get lost." She turned and cast a cutting hex on the tree nearest to them. A large gash appeared on the trunk and Hermione screamed. Hundreds of large, beetle like brown bugs gushed out of the dead trunk, flowing down the tree and onto the ground, crawling over their shoes. Hermione grabbed him, backing away from the bugs as if they were Voldemort himself. As they backed away from them they also walked over others, the bugs made a crunch and a dull squeak as they were crushed underfoot. Their appearance had shocked Harry too, his heart was pounding and he could feel his hands shaking. When he had heard Hermione scream he had expected something far worse.

"S-Sorry." Hermione stammered out, eyes still wide and face ashen. She tried to force a shaky smile but it came out as more of a grimace. "They just...surprised me."

"I bet." Harry chuckled once, nervously. He was still staring down at the scattering bugs. So he had been wrong about there being no life here. "Are you okay?"

She loosened her death grip on his arm and quickly ran a hand over her face, which was beginning to regain its color. "I'm fine, next time I'll use a different spell. Lets go." She moved her hand from his arm to his hand and they continued walking, trying to avoid stepping on the still scattering bugs. The only noise in the forest was the sound of

their feet on the dry ground and their breathing. They didn't dare speak.

They wondered for what felt like hours, seeing nothing more than tall thin trees and fog. Harry was beginning to understand exactly what Isabel meant about this place. It was wrong. Nothing about it seemed natural and everything looked...*sick*. The longer they stayed the more he wanted to turn around and get out of there as soon as he could. The only thing that kept him from turning tail and running was the thought of the horcrux and he knew that if they left there was no way they would come back. Hermione seemed as determined to slog through as he did but every time he glanced over at her he could see her face paling more and more and she was shivering. Soon they were clutching one another just to make themselves keep going. The fog was the worst part of it all, it felt somehow thick and slimy and when they breathed it in their stomachs lurched. Something was definitely wrong with this place. If they didn't find the cup and get out of there soon Harry wasn't sure what would happen to them.

Every once in a while Hermione would cast a spell on a tree, painting a bright red X to mark their path. Harry was beginning to believe they were walking in circles, the scenery never seemed to change and they had no way to tell that they had even moved. He could feel cold sweat gathering on his face and he was trembling. The only thing that reassured him was that he couldn't see the X's so they had to be going *somewhere*. He was about to give up when he tripped.

"What the-" he muttered, catching himself. The dirt had abruptly ended and revealed concrete. He frowned. It seemed a little out of place but then again they were in a forest in the middle of suburbia.

Hermione's shocked voice made him look up. "Harry..." the cement was a short walkway that led to a two story house. The house was much like the ones on the outside of the forest but to say it was in disrepair would be a severe understatement. The walkway in front of them was cracked and bits of the sickly grass grew through it. The house was made of faded brick that was covered with dried, brown ivy and the chimney had crumbled. What once might have been the lawn had dried to nothing but hard dirt and patches of the strange grass. The five or six steps that led to the crumbling porch were

cracked and lopsided and the front door was hanging off of its hinges. Nothing but darkness could be seen through the door. All the windows were broken except for one side of the bottom floor where there was nothing but a gaping hole. The strangest part of the house was the humongous tree growing out of the very center of it, the top peeking through the hole where the chimney once stood. The house looked like it had, had years and years to fall into such disrepair but that was impossible because according to Isabel it had only been a few years since it had been lost.

“Well...I guess we found it.” He joked feebly, wiping moisture away from his clammy forehead. This place made his severely uncomfortable. A distinct creepiness radiated from the house, it felt almost like...death. Not to mention the forest around them which was wholly unnatural and seemed determined to swallow the house, hiding whatever it was inside. It seemed like the perfect place for a horcrux.

Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped past him onto the sidewalk and began walking up to the decrepit house. She stopped and looked over her shoulder, brow raised. “Well, are you coming?” with a deep breath he caught up with her and they made their way down the cracked walkway. The stairs were a bit tricky to navigate with the large cracks running through them but they made it to the short, brick porch.

“Should we knock?” Hermione whispered nervously, hesitating in front of the moldy threshold. Even now that they were directly in front of the door they could still see nothing inside of the house but complete darkness.

Harry nudged the hanging door slightly and it shuddered, the wood grinding. “I don’t think the door would survive that and plus, I doubt anyone is home.” He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, lifted the light still in his palm, and stepped into the darkness.

A/N: I bet you all hate me now! I didn’t update for months and then a cliffhanger. Don’t kill me though, I had no choice this time. If it wasn’t a cliffie this would be a *ridiculously* long chapter. I’m

trying not to promise to update really soon because really, I don't have a lot of time to write lately but I will promise that I will NEVER abandon this fic so y'all don't have to ask me that question anymore. Hopefully you all enjoyed this chapter and thank you all for your encouraging reviews. I'll try very hard to get the next chapter up soon. Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Chapter 32

It wasn't anything like he expected. He had been expecting to see the house in the same decrepit state as the outside but he was very wrong. The house was beautiful. Honey colored wood covered the floor and bright, artificial sunlight streamed through the unbroken windows. The walls were painted with sunny yellow with a bottom board of white wood. To the far left of them was an alcove where stairs of white wood led to what must be the second floor. The warm scent of wood and freshly baked bread reached his nose and soft music was playing from somewhere in the house. He gaped at his surrounding, eyes wide. This was *not* what he had been expecting. As warm and homey as their surroundings were the same darkness from the forest permeated this house. He could feel it all around him, sitting heavy in the air and crawling over his skin.

"What going on here?" Hermione whispered with confusion and unease clear in her voice.

Harry shook his head, still looking around the hallway in shock. "I have no idea. This is all just...too weird." He closed his hand and extinguished the 'lumos'.

"Who's there?!" A voice screeched, causing the two to jump. Hermione's hand flew up as did Harry's, both dropping into dueling positions, and they scanned the room for the source of the question. Standing in a doorway neither had noticed was a woman, holding a wand pointed directly at them. She was tall, thin in the extreme with skin so pale it was nearly translucent. Her hair was a dark gray and cropped short, only reaching her ears. A wide thin mouth was pulled into what appeared to be a threatening scowl and her dark brown eyes were narrowed as she gazed at them. Isabel's mother. Once you looked deeper than her worn appearance the resemblance between she and her daughter was quite evident.

The boney hand on the wand was steady and from the way she braced herself she looked perfectly ready, and able, to defend herself. Harry might've been a bit more worried if he couldn't see the obvious

fear in her eyes and if she didn't look like a good wind would blow her right over.

"We're not here to hurt you." He said soothingly, hand still raised. "We're just here to speak with you, Mrs. Greythorn." he realized then that they had never asked Isabel her mother's first name.

"I know what you're here for!" She yelled, her grip on her wand tightening, her eyes darting frantically between them. "You're here for the cup." Harry froze. His eyes met Hermione's; the shock in her gaze was probably well reflected in his own. This was definitely not going as he had expected it to.

"Well you'll not be getting it from me!" She hissed fiercely. "Get out before anyone gets hurt!"

"There is no need for anyone to get hurt." Hermione's voice was gentle and she slowly began lowering her hand, keeping the palms up so the woman could see she meant no harm. Harry's eyes darted to her and she gave him a reassuring nod, not taking her eyes from the armed woman in front of them. Harry reluctantly followed her example. Mrs. Greythorn kept her wand trained on them, suspicion darkening her eyes. "We're not going to lie to you Mrs. Greythorn; we are here to speak with you about the cup."

"Then you can get out!"

Harry was quickly losing patience with this. "Look Mrs. Greythorn, I'm sorry but we are not leaving without that cup." He said firmly, beginning to once again raise his hand. They could just stun her and find the cup themselves. He wanted to get out of this house and as far away from this forest as humanly possible.

"Harry!" Hermione hissed, shooting him a furious look.

The woman started with surprise, blinking at him with a confused expression. "Harry?" she muttered. "Not...Harry Potter?" he nodded and she gasped, nearly losing her hold on her wand but still keeping it trained on them. "What are you? Why...What are you doing *here*?"

He lowered his hand once again, seeing an opening. "As we said, we're here about the cup. It's very important." His tone had softened. She stared hard at him for a second, frowning. Seemingly coming to a decision she lowered her wand.

"I know. Follow me." She turned sharply and stepped back through the doorway she had entered from, disappearing through it. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look before he took a deep breath and followed after the woman, Hermione already behind him.

The room they entered was a small kitchen, painted in the same sunny yellow as the hallway. Mrs. Greythorn was leaning against a china cabinet. She didn't look at them but gestured towards a small dining table near a picture window. The window was obviously enchanted as it showed a sunny neighborhood, just like the one just beyond the forest. They slid into chairs next to each other, facing her and waited for her to speak. The silence was thick and tense as she stared out the enchanted window, a strange expression of both longing and resolve on her face. Finally she began to speak.

"I know just how important the tea cup is." She turned her dark gaze to them. "I know *exactly* what it is."

"How?" Hermione asked after a moment of stunned silence. Harry leaned forward; he wanted to know the answer too. Did she really know or did she just think she did? How *would* she know?

The woman shook her head, running a hand through her short hair and sending it into disarray. "I have always been a collector. It is well known that I collect objects once owned by the founders or other great witches and wizards but that is not all I collect." She paused, as if deliberating whether or not to go on. "I also collect objects of power. Most powerful, long dead witches and wizards owned objects with great power; objects enchanted and charmed to do great things and for years I have been collecting just these types of objects. But that's not all I collected." Her head dropped into her hands. Her next words were muffled by her shaking hands. "I also collected dark objects. Things enchanted with dark magic to give them more power." Her head lifted slightly from her hands, red-rimmed eyes peeking from between her fingers. She chuckled once, not an ounce of humor in

the forced sound. "Dark magic. I had never believed that any kind of magic could be truly dark. You know, the way you use it and all, but I guess I was wrong. For years I stored up these objects, jewelry, paintings, even toys, until I was given the teacup." She met their eyes, a look of pleading in her own. "I had no idea what it was exactly when Is-Isabel" –Her voice cracked as she said her daughter's name and her face nearly crumbled but she quickly regained control, her fists clenching– "gave it to me. It was the perfect gift. Just like Bell to give me something so wonderful. I was so excited to have it. To me it was proof that my family were magical, that we were apart of true magical lineage even if we did choose to live among muggles. I spent too many years being called a-a *mudblood* and heard the same slander thrown at my daughter, my entire family, and I wanted it to end. I made sure that all of my friends knew that I had Hufflepuff's tea cup." She spat the words bitterly, her eyes straying back to the window. "That was my mistake. It was a few days later when the knock came at my door. There was a man standing there. He was wearing a black cloak and a white mask and as soon as I saw him I knew what he was. I tried to close the door but he forced his way inside and demanded the cup. Before I could even think to open my mouth and tell him where it was he raised his wand and I barely avoided the killing curse he cast at me. He wasn't just there for the cup; he was there to kill me. I fought him as best I could, I was always a rather good dueler, and in the end I...defeated him." She flinched, lost in the memory. "After I...removed him from my home I took the cup from its place in my cabinet and looked over it. Sure it was a beautiful little thing and a relic of one of the founders but what would a death eater want with it? I cast a detection spell on it but it showed nothing but a few ever-cleaning and anti-wear charms. I tried every spell revealing spell I could think of and nothing happened. It made no sense, I *knew* something powerful must be cast upon it to cause a death eater to come and retrieve it. I was just about ready to give up when I remembered a spell to detect dark magic. I hadn't thought of it before and now that I look back on it, it seems kind of idiotic that I hadn't; anyway, I cast the spell and this terrible red light began to glow around it and power just *radiated* from it. I didn't know exactly what it was but it was extremely powerful and I had no doubt that more death eaters would come looking for it so...I hid." With a miserable sigh she sank down into an available chair across from them. Looking at her now, she for the first time looked like an old woman. She was

hunched in the chair, as if trying to protect herself and the lines in her face deepened. A severe sadness permeated the air around her,

“Why didn’t you get rid of it, Mrs. Greythorn?” Harry asked, not quite understanding.

The woman waved a pale hand dismissively. “Rachel. You know all of my secrets now; you might as well call me by my first name.” She tried to smile but it died before it even settled on her lips. “To answer your question I knew that if the death eaters, more importantly You-Know-Who wanted it so badly it was something incredibly dangerous and I didn’t want it to fall into the wrong hands and...I was weak.” Her face did crumble this time and tears began running down her ashen cheeks. She wrapped her arms around herself, seeking comfort. “It was only a moment of weakness but it was the biggest mistake of my life. The cup just has so much power, every time I touched it I could *feel* it and it was intoxicating. I’m not sure if I even really thought it through or if I was just rationalizing what I was doing but in under a day Rachel Greythorn had disappeared off the face of the earth. It was all rather simple really; I just encouraged the trees around the neighborhood to move in a bit closer. The hard part was the notice-me-not charm on the forest, it was a large feat of magic but I did it and none of my neighbors were the wiser. In the first few weeks I was finally able to figure out what exactly the cup was. It was a horcrux.” Her voice was horrorstricken as she spoke the word. “And if You-Know-Who wanted it, sent someone after it, I *knew* it must be his. Still I was able to convince myself that I was hiding just to protect my family but that little illusion didn’t last long and I realized what a terrible thing I had done. I had abandoned my family for power, dark power.” She shuddered, choking on her sobs. “It was two or three weeks more before I even tried to leave to go back to my family but I just, I just *couldn’t*! As soon as I stepped into it this crushing fear came over me and took my breath away. I thought I heard voices calling my name and I was *terrified*. I ran back into the house and I never left again.” She wiped furiously at her cheeks, as if angry at herself for the tears there. “The cup changed me, it changed everything! I could feel its power seeping into the very walls of this house, the very floorboards and I can’t escape it. I will never escape this wretched place and I deserve to die here. I can only imagine

what I put my family through and if they knew what I had done they would hate me forever. I can never go back.”

Hermione placed her hands over one of Rachel’s tears sparkling in her own eyes. “Your family would never hate you.” She said fiercely. “They love you, which is why they never stopped looking for you. They would be too happy knowing that you’re alive to *care!*”

A ragged sob broke from the old woman’s lips. “They would never forgive me.”

“Yes they would.” Harry said with conviction. “Without a doubt and without a thought they would forgive you.” He leaned forward, looking directly into her eyes. “You know what the cup is so you should understand why we have to destroy it. It’s evil and powerful and you would’ve been hard pressed to resist it. Once we have the cup we’re going to leave here and you are going to come with us. You’re going to see your family again and everything will be alright.”

She stared into his eyes for a long moment, tears still falling down her cheeks, before nodding once. With a smile Hermione squeezed her hand gently before releasing it. Standing, the woman smiled a feeble but genuine smile.

“I’ll take you to the cup.” She said. Harry opened his mouth to thank her when a cold, snide voice interrupted him. A voice he instantly recognized.

“Good because I have been looking all over for it.” Standing in the doorway clad in death eater robes, mask dangling in one hand and wand held firmly in the other was Lucius Malfoy. He looked all too pleased with himself, smirking widely and eyes sparkling with triumph.

Rachel jumped up and scrambled backwards, her face devoid of color and full of fear. She fumbled with her wand until it was pointed at the figure in the doorway of her small kitchen. Harry and Hermione rose also, slower than the older woman. Inwardly Harry was cursing, his mind flashing to the bright red Xs. They had left a perfect, blazing trail directly to them.

"Now, tell me where it is woman." Lucius took a step farther into the kitchen, his gaze locked onto Mrs. Greythorn. She shook her head furiously.

"No! You-You can't have it!" she seemed to be trying to press herself into the wall. The smirk dropped from Malfoy's face and he took another step, moving towards her.

"I said-"

Harry stepped in front of him, wand raised. "You can't have it Malfoy." He had dug the wand out of his pocket, a place he had taken to carrying it. Just because he didn't use it didn't mean he didn't carry it with him, he wasn't quite ready for everyone to know every little trick he had. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Hermione was already holding her own.

"And I'm guessing you and your little pet mudblood is going to stop me?" Malfoy sneered.

"We stopped you before, didn't we?" Hermione hissed, eyes narrowed with hatred. His face contorted with rage and he raised his wand higher, pointing it at Hermione chest. Before he could cast the spell on his lips Harry pushed his wand closer to the man's pale face, directly between his eyes.

"Don't try it Malfoy, the odds are in our favor. Three against one."

Slowly Malfoy began to smirk. "Do you *really* think I would come alone?" as if they had been waiting for a cue more death eaters rushed into the room. There were at least six of them and they all came flooding through the doorway behind Lucius. Their wands flew out of their hands and into the crowd, caught by one of the death eaters. The death eaters formed a half circle, blocking both the doorway, all with wands raised and pointed at them. Harry, Hermione, and Rachel's backs were to the wall and the window. They couldn't escape.

"I think the odds are in *our* favor." A dark chuckle rose up from the death eaters. They were obviously quite sure of their victory.

Harry's eyes flew quickly around the room, trying to find some sort of weakness in the wall the death eaters had built. Just beyond them he could see more of the black robed figures in the hallways and he had no doubt that more were outside. Both he and Hermione could easily summon their wands back to them and blast their way out of here but they couldn't leave without that cup and they needed to buy some time. Let them believe that they had all three disarmed and without any measure of defense.

Malfoy turned his silver eyes from the couple in front of him and to Rachel who was still pressed against the wall, hands clenched at her sides. "Tell me where it is."

She swallowed hard and stood straighter, lifting her chin in defiance. "No." her voice shook. The death eaters laughed again and Malfoy scoffed.

"Crucio!" just before the unforgivable reached Rachel she ducked down and the curse slammed into the window and it shattered. The illusion was instantly broken and the dark forest was once again in view. Seizing the moment, Harry grabbed Hermione's hand and Rachel's arm and pulled them through the large window and they were instantly plunged into darkness. They scuttled close to the ground as spells flew overhead and impacted with the surrounding trees, sending splinters of bark flying into the air and more of the bugs spilling onto the ground. They sprinted deeper into the trees until they were out of range. They hid behind a group of trees, the fog and the darkness providing extra protection.

"We-We have to g-get out of here." Rachel gasped out, a hand clutching her chest. She made to push herself form the dry ground but Hermione grabbed her thin arm and pulled her back down.

"We can't." She whispered, eyes scanning the area around them for more death eaters. The fog was thick enough that they might not spot a death eater before they were upon them. "We can't leave without the tea cup."

Rachel shook her head furiously and moisture was beginning to pool in her eyes. "No! I have to...I'm finally out of that house and I have to find my daughter. I have to get back to my family!"

“Then can you just tell us where it is?” Harry asked quickly, not at all liking staying in this spot. They needed to get that cup and get out of here.

“I can’t just tell you.” She shook her head, a conflicted expression on her face. “It has a security spell on the place where I hid it. The only person who can get past it is me.”

Harry looked her in the eyes, his own pleading with her. “Then will you help us?”

She paled, her already near translucent skin turning a ghostly white. She took a deep breath and nodded, unable to speak.

“Thank you.”

As carefully and speedily as they could they began moving back towards the house, taking a different route than they had taken just a short while ago. They quickly worked out a make-shift plan as they moved, knowing that they had very little time before the death eaters would find them. Even now they could hear the sound of them crashing through the trees.

Harry had been right, there were more death eaters outside. They were barely able to see them but there was at least four more circling the illusioned house, not counting the ones that had chased them after the escape from the kitchen.

“The others don’t seem to be near the door.” Harry commented as they crouched in the dark shadow of a tree. He was thankful for the sickly fog and the darkness; at least they would be hard pressed to spot them.

“There doesn’t seem to be but there could be, and probably are more.” He could just see the frown on Hermione’s face as she spoke.

“Well we have to take our chances.” He looked over his shoulder to the figure he believed was Rachel. “Which room is the cup in?” She shuffled a bit closer and he could see the outline of her face, the fear clearly etched on her features. She pointed a shaking finger to the top floor at what appeared to be a gaping hole.

“Right there, my bedroom. I wanted to keep it close.”

There was a moment of silence as Harry stared at the guarding death eaters. “We need a distraction.” He said, breaking the silence. “We need something to take their attention away from the door.” Hermione grinned.

“I know just the thing.” She went to stand up and Harry grabbed her, much the way she had grabbed Rachel.

“What are you doing? You’ll get yourself killed!” he hissed. He didn’t even have to see her to know she rolled her eyes.

“Harry.” She sighed. “We don’t have time for this. I’m going to sneak over that way and cause a distraction. When they run that way you two get into the house as quick as you can, get upstairs, get the cup, and get out. I’ll meet you and then we’ll get out of this godforsaken forest.”

“Hermione-”

She leaned over and pecked him on the lips, squeezing his hand. “I’ll be fine Harry. You two be careful.” And she was gone. Harry barely heard her steps as she disappeared amongst the trees. He couldn’t see where she went in the gloom and soon all was silent. He really didn’t want her doing this, he hated the thought of her putting herself in danger. If something happened to her...Rachel moved a bit closer to him. He could feel her shaking even without her touching him. She was terrified.

“It’ll be ok.” He murmured, trying to reassure both of them. Seconds ticked by in tense silence, feeling like hours, before there was a commotion to the far left of the death eaters. In the thick silence of the forest the sound of breaking branches, as if someone was stepping on them, reached their ears with deadly clarity. The death eaters looked at one another before two of them began inching towards the source of the sound, wands raised. Harry felt his heart jump into his throat and he barely restrained himself from jumping up and putting a stop to the death eaters right then. He dug his nails into the dry dirt, reminding himself over and over again that Hermione could take care of herself, she knew what she was doing. He could

barely see from their hiding place but as the death eaters drew closer the sound came again and with it a figure. It was impossible to work out any kind of identifying features in the dark but the two death eaters gave a shout and ran towards the figure. As soon as they began coming towards it the figure took off running and two other unidentifiable figure appeared, joining it. The other death eaters left their posts, sprinting after the obscures figures and their comrades. The sounds of running footsteps and the shouting of spells quickly began. As soon as he was sure as he could be that the entrance was clear Harry jumped to his feet, Rachel right behind him and they ran as fast as they could towards the door. As he ran Harry silently prayed that Hermione would be able to hide from the death eaters, that they wouldn't get their hands on her. The only thing that kept him from turning and running straight after the death eaters was the thought of the cup.

Rachel looked as if she had once been athletic but the years of locking herself away in her house, scared and stressed had left her thin and weak and she was lagging behind Harry, gasping for breath and stumbling. Harry had just reached the walkway when he noticed that Rachel was no longer behind him. He stopped short and looked over his shoulder. The older woman was on her knees, one hand supporting her and the other clutching her chest. He could hear her ragged breaths. He jogged back over to her, eyes moving around rapidly in search of death eaters.

"Rachel, are you okay?" He asked, looking about them anxiously. It was so dark, the fog so thick someone could be watching them at this very moment. Before she answered he grasped her arm and began pulling her to her feet.

"I-I'm" –She wheezed. "I'm fine." She shakily pushed herself up, leaning against his shoulder.

"Then we have to keep going. Come on." He'd have liked to give her a second or so to catch her breath but they needed to get through that door. He wrapped an arm around her waist, clearly feeling her ribs, and nearly carried her as he jogged down the walkway. Just as they were getting up the steps a spell flew at them, missing Rachel by

inches and impacting with the house. The illusion flickered momentarily before moving back to its decrepit appearance.

“Crucio!” this time the spell was cast at Harry. He moved at the last second and the spell hit the step he had just occupied. He tightened his grip on the woman and pulled her up the stairs. He glanced over his shoulder quickly and cursed furiously. Running after them was at least four death eaters and they were quickly gaining on them. Harry kicked open the door and dived inside. He slammed the door closed and cast every single locking spell he knew on it. He doubted it would stop them for long but they needed every second. The sound of glass breaking came from a doorway at the very end of the hallway, what he guessed must be the living room, and he pulled them both into the alcove of the stairway.

“Why are we looking for a bloody *teacup* anyway?” a voice and there was another loud sound of something breaking. Harry put a finger to his lips and began pulling Rachel up the staircase.

“Which once?” He asked, whispering when they reached the landing. There were two doors on either side of them

“That one.” She gasped out, pointing to the second door to the left of them. Now that they were in the light he could see how terrible she looked. Her hair was mussed and dirty, her face was ashen and sweat was pouring down it. She was blinking furiously, as if she was having trouble keeping them open, he had felt her shaking earlier but now he could see it. She looked ready to pass out right then and there. He once again wrapped an arm around her tiny waist, gripping the banister.

“Come on, we’ll get the cup and then we’re getting you out of here.”

They hurried to the door and Rachel reached out a hand and gripped the door handle. It flashed red, and then green before the door swung open. They ran inside and closed the door behind him. The bedroom was dimly lit, the only light coming from an enchanted window at the far end of the room. It was rather simple, painted blue and white, a bed was pushed against one wall, there was a dresser, and bookcases full of books. An old Hufflepuff scarf was thrown over what looked like a very old radio which was where the soft music was

coming from. At one end, the obvious focal point of the room, was a row of shelves. The shelves were full of pictures of members of the Greythron family. Harry couldn't imagine it, spending years *willingly* away from your family, completely alone.

"It's here." Rachel shuffled over to one of the bookcases and grabbed a thick, leather-bound book. When she tugged on the book an entire portion of the bookcase fell away, revealing a safe. The door of the safe was completely smooth, there was no lock or handle, only shining steel. Rachel ran her hands over the safe and stopped them in the very center of it. She took a deep, shaking breath and pressed. There was a hiss of escaping air and the safe slowly opened. At the back, looking innocent was a small golden teacup. Harry edged closer, almost hesitantly. It was pure gold. The Hogwarts crest was engraved on one side and the Hufflepuff crest on the other. The handle was inlaid with tiny yellow diamonds. He moved closer and began to reach into the safe. Rachel had her arms wrapped tightly around her waist and nervousness and indecision was expressed on her face. Just as his fingers brushed the handle there was a crash downstairs. They had gotten through the door. A shout came from below them.

"Potter's in the house!"

"Potter's-"

"In the house! Find him now! He has the cup!"

Harry snatched the teacup from the safe just as they heard steps thundering up the stairs. They would be there any second.

"Come on!" he again grabbed Rachel's arm but it was too late. The bedroom door was blasted off of its hinges. Wood flew into the air and though they ducked they didn't get away unscratched. Harry felt bits of wood biting into his skin, scratching him, and a rather large chunk of the door hit Rachel on the side of the head. Blood flew, spraying the wall and the rows of pictures, staining the happy faces with the dark red liquid. Rachel dropped to her knees and clutched her head, blood dripping from between her fingers, but head wounds were always bloody. She was alive but she would need medical

attention fast. Two death eaters came crashing into the room, completely blocking off the exit.

“Give us the cup!” one of the masked men shouted. Not even bothering with the usual banter, Harry raised his free hand and flicked his wrist. The death eater was thrown into the air and into a bookcase. It on top of him, sending books everywhere and a small pool of blood was beginning to seep from under the bookcase. The other death eater vaulted over his fallen fellow without a glance and raised his wand.

“**Accio teacup!**” the cup was tugged forcefully from Harry’s hands, the pull much stronger than he had expected. Before it could get near the death eater, Rachel, with surprising speed, jumped to her feet and snatched the cup from the air. Without pause she pulled her arm back and threw it too Harry and as it flew through the air, Harry reaching up to catch it, another spell was cast.

“**Avada Kedavra!**” everything moved morbidly slow. The green light flew through the air, seemingly at a snail’s pace, and hit Rachel. An expression of shock, of confusion filled her face before she dropped. The sound of her body hitting the ground was sickening, a dull thump and crack as her head came in contact with the hardwood floor. Her head was tilted, her empty eyes staring blankly at the blood-spattered pictures of her family. As soon as her body hit the floor the view outside of the window flickered and changed, the muggle neighborhood was now clearly in view which meant the muggles could also see them.

Harry’s heart wrenched. This was his fault, if he hadn’t forced her...he tore his eyes from the fallen body of the woman and glared at the masked man with the utmost hatred.

“Whoops, did I kill your little mudblood friend?” he taunted, laughing with pleasure.

Harry could feel it, that familiar and intoxicating tingle flowing through his veins. Absolute rage and *power* licked at him, filling him with hot tingles, his ears beginning to ring. That was the last time. This...*man* was never going to take the life of another human being. He was going to put a stop to this. He raised both of his hands, having every

intention of killing the man in front of him when the death eater was suddenly blown off of his feet. He slammed into the wall with crushing force before sliding boneless to the ground, a line of blood trailing down the wall behind his head . Hermione came running through the doorway at full speed. She launched herself over the bookcase and the unconscious death eater before spinning around to face the jagged hole where the door once stood. After a complicated twist of her wrists and flick of her fingers, muttering an incantation under her breath so quickly the words tumbled over themselves, what looked like a solid brick wall materialized over the hole and a complete silence abruptly fell over the room . It wasn't real brick but it would hold off whomever was behind her for a while.

"Harry!" she shouted, fear and panic coloring the word. She was streaked with dirt and there was a small gash on her temple, smeared and dried blood down the side of her face. She jumped over the death eater still under the bookcase and ran over to Harry's side. She opened her mouth as if to say something when her eyes moved to the body of Rachel. She let out a strangled scream and her hands flew to her mouth. She looked to Harry with horrorstricken eyes. "How-" a sudden violent shake to her 'brick' wall cut off her sentence. She whirled back around and flicked her wrist again at the block, strengthening it. She turned back around and knelt on the floor next to Rachel's body, the knees of her trousers soaking through with the still warm blood now pooling on the floor. Harry nearly flinched at the absolute horror and guilt in her eyes as one of her hands shakily reached up and closed the woman's lids, her eyes never to be opened again. Hermione looked up at him and this time he did flinch at her anguished gaze, at the question in her darkened orbs. He looked down at her pleadingly, trying to swallow past the painful lump in his throat and the power still thrumming through his veins.

"I-I couldn't stop-" he looked away, not able to take the accusation he was sure to see in her eyes. His own eyes landed on the unconscious death eater and the power roared, demanding his blood. Harry's hand moved towards him once again and his eyes practically glowed with some sort of unholy light. "*He* did it." he spat through clenched teeth. He was going to kill him. He had done it before and he sure as hell wasn't afraid to do it again. Monsters deserved to die. His eyes

narrowed and just as he was about to cast the spell he felt a small, strong hand clamp around his wrist.

“No Harry, we don’t have time.” Hermione said firmly, now standing. “Please Harry, he’ll probably die from the head wound anyway.”

The ache was clear in her voice. Every part of her agreed that the creature crumpled on the floor deserved to die for what he did; she believed that it was their responsibility to put a stop to these death eaters but they didn’t have the time. There were death eaters still casting spells at the blockage and every once in a while the ‘brick’ would flicker and seem to buckle. She had no idea how many were just beyond the barrier of the door but they were undoubtedly outnumbered. They needed to get out. The death eaters could break through any second and there were simply too many for them to handle.

They must have learned their lesson from Italy and were trying out a new plan, simply overwhelming them with sheer numbers. There were many, many more death eaters than either she or Harry had first believed and when Hermione had ran into the room there had been maybe six chasing her, not to mention the at least twelve in the house already. The illusion had fallen and she had no doubt that the muggles would come to investigate soon. They needed to escape while they still could, before the muggle authorities were called and before there was a blood-bath. The death eaters would not hesitate to shed the blood of the innocent muggles surrounding them.

Harry’s burning eyes never moved from the prone figure of the death eater and Hermione stepped into his line of vision, forcing him to meet her eyes directly. Her grip was still tight on his wrist. “We don’t have time for this! We need to get out of here.” She stressed, her gaze unwavering. Harry forced himself to meet her gaze and pull his murderous glare from the death eater. Her words made sense to him, he knew she was right but the power was still thrumming in his ears. Just one flick of his wrist and one more monster would be removed from the world. Hermione might have a strong hold on one wrist but he could still use the other.

"It'll only take a second." The coldness of his own tone surprised him. Hermione opened her mouth to plead with him, fearful eyes flicking back and forth between him and the now trembling 'brick'. It was not going to last much longer. Before she could get her words out a large part of the brick crumbled away and the sounds of shouted spells and threats filled the room. The new hole wasn't large enough for a full grown person to squeeze through but by the way the death eaters were battering at the remaining section, their vigor renewed with their oncoming victory, it wouldn't belong before the mass of dark robed figures would come pouring into the room and they would be done for. This seemed to snap Harry out of his lethal trance. He acutely felt some of the power drain from him but it did not completely fade, he could still feel it tingling beneath his skin. Hermione released his wrist.

"You're right." He forced out. "We need to go." He eyes scanned the room quickly, looking for some means of escape.

The door was of course out of the question, unless the *wanted* to walk straight into their deaths. There was the window, which was much smaller than he had thought at first glance, but they were pretty high off of the ground. There was only the door and the one window. They had no choice. A cushioning charm would at least keep them from breaking any bones.

The door flickered again and Harry grabbed Hermione's hand. They turned towards the window, Hermione lifted her hand and with a flick the glass shattered, sending shards flying to the ground far below them. She grabbed the ledge and looked back at the still form of Rachel, a look of guilt and extreme sorrow in her dark eyes.

"We'll come back for her." She whispered to Harry, making the promise more to the departed woman than to him. She wrenched her eyes from the body and made to launch herself out of the window, Harry right behind her. Before either of them could make their escape the battering on the barrier suddenly ceased. Uneasiness began to rise in Harry's chest and when he met Hermione's eyes, the girl still perched on the window sill, and in them he could see the same wariness.

He opened his mouth. "Keep goi-" before he could finish speaking the words another hole was suddenly blown through the barrier, this one quite a bit larger than the first. The crunch of the breaking barrier startled Hermione and she nearly slipped over the edge, she regained her grip before she fell. The noise of before increased dramatically and the sounds of shouted spells, breaking glass, screams, and other noises reached the ears of the couple. It was much louder than before. Harry cursed and gripped Hermione's arm, readying to throw the both of them out of the window but the action was stopped by a spell impacting with the frame of the window, grazing his ear and leaving a bloody gash. Harry's hand flew to his injured ear and he spun around. A death eater had climbed through the new hole and was already reading to cast another curse. Both Harry and Hermione's hands flew up to cast their own spells but someone beat them to it. The death eater let out a noise between a scream and a gurgle before falling to the ground. A tall, dark figure was standing with wand still raised.

"Potter." A familiar, deep voice said. Harry instantly recognized him, Kingsley Shacklebot. He, if possible, tensed even more. To say the sight of the dark-skinned man there was unexpected would be a severe understatement. What was he doing here? Was the fighting going on behind the protective barrier being done by the Order? The man strode over to them with his usual look of calm, not seeming to take any notice of the battle raging just behind the barrier at his back. The only betrayal of his expression was the fierce glint in his dark eyes and the way they darted about, he was gripping the wand in his hand tightly. His long legs stepped over the fallen bookcase and the death eater below it, not seeming to take any noticed of the crumpled bodies near him.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked with shock as the older man made his way over to them. Harry could see her release her grip on the ledge, lifting one of her hands an inch or two incase there was a need for her to protect herself. Seeing her cautious action, Harry took a more suspicious look at the man. Wouldn't that be a clever trick? Fooling them into believing one of their friends was coming to offer them help and having him turn into a death eater and off them both. Harry tensed and moved his own hand. Kingsley's brows rose with what could only be amusement when he took in their defensive

movements but he stopped his approach, pausing a few steps away from them.

He glanced back at the doorway before looking at them with serious eyes. "I'm here with an auror team." He gestured down at his clothing and for the first time Harry took in the black and gold robes. He felt some of the tension ease out of his shoulders and his hand lowered slightly. While he wasn't exactly thrilled about being anywhere near anything affiliated with the Ministry he would rather deal with aurors than with the Order. The last person he wanted to have any dealings with was Dumbledore. Kingsley continued, speaking quickly. "We got wind of an attack on a muggle neighborhood and we were dispatched here. We didn't have any idea you two were here until we saw them trying to break down the barrier. If one of them hadn't said Potter's name we wouldn't have known what was going on. The two of you need to get out of here right now. The Order is on their way."

Harry took a sharp step back and Hermione's eyes narrowed at the man, the hand still gripping the ledge tightening. "You contacted the Order?" she hissed. Kingsley shook his head, eyes moving to the barrier as it once again quaked. His gaze moved back to them and for the first time they both saw a glint of panic in his eyes.

"No." his voice was still calm but the words were still spoken swiftly. "I am not the only auror in the Order. They are on their way here, along with Dumbledore." The dark eyes moved to Harry. He nearly flinched at the name, the now all too familiar feeling of anger rising up within him. The power in his veins responded to the emotion and he could feel the tingle beneath his skin increasing. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to calm. "The aurors are keeping the death eaters busy for now but it is only a matter of time before either one of them break through or your barrier completely falls to pieces. Either way you need to get out of here."

Harry stared at the man for a brief moment, deciding whether or not to trust him. Kingsley had never once directly done anything to harm them and his gut feeling told him that the older man was to be trusted but this could easily be another trap by Dumbledore. He met the man's eyes and came to a decision. He looked over his shoulder at Hermione. The same resolve he felt was seen in her face, they were

going to trust him. With one more guilt-ridden look at the body of Rachel, Hermione swung her other leg over the ledge, the only thing keeping her from plunging to ground below was her grip on the sill. Before she let go, Harry reached out and touched the side of her face briefly, looking into her eyes. She gave him a reassuring, if not slightly forced, smile before letting go. Harry watched with his heart in his throat as she plunged towards the hard ground of the now sunny backyard. He began to panic when he didn't see her cast the spell and he was just lifting his hand to do it himself, to save her, when she hit the ground. She must have cast the cushioning spell before he could see her do it because she bounced harmlessly before rolling and pushing herself quickly to her feet. Harry sagged with relief, swallowing down the lump that had formed in his throat as he watched her pitch to the ground.

"Your turn Potter." Kingsley spoke. Harry started; he had almost forgotten the other man. He nodded once and slung his own leg of over the window ledge. Straddling it, hands gripping the weather beaten wood, he once again met the gaze of the bald man.

"Why are you helping us?" the sounds of the battle seemed distant now, even the sound of spells pounding on the shaky barrier seemed like a faraway noise. Something about the serene way Kingsley looked at him calmed him, calmed the power raging just beneath his skin. The man crossed his arms over his wide chest and returned Harry's gaze with significance.

"You no longer need to be protected Potter, that is something Dumbledore has failed to realize." He spoke matter-of-factly, without emotion. "The man believes what he's doing is the best course of action but his mind has become clouded with all he believes is for the best and he's forgotten what's right. The line between right and wrong seems to have become very blurred to him but I know what he has been doing and what he is doing is wrong." There was another crunch and more pieces fell from the barrier. He jerked his head towards the window. "Get going Potter, you don't have much time." He didn't wait for Harry to leave; he turned his back and in seconds had climbed back through the barrier and into the battle. Harry didn't wait for another surprise. He threw his other leg over the ledge and released his hold on the sill.

There was no fear. Instead of the terror he had been expecting to feel as he plunged all too fast from the window, he felt...at ease. He watched the ground rushing up towards him without trepidation. The wind rushed at his face and through his hair and as strange as it sounds a part of him felt like it would catch him, save him from harm. Besides the peace of the fall there was also a sense of exhilaration. He was almost sorry when he landed. Luckily the spell Hermione had cast was still in affect so he bounced harmlessly once on the tangled grass before once again hitting the ground softly and rolling to the side. He didn't waste any time before getting to his feet. His bright eyes darted around the yard, looking for any sign of Hermione. Panic began to rise in him and he looked around frantically, already beginning to curse himself for even letting her go first when he heard a soft hissing noise behind him. His head shot in the direction of the noise and his body nearly sagged with relief when he caught sight of Hermione hiding just beyond the corner of the house, pressed against the wall. She gestured sharply for him to hurry and he jogged toward her. The outside of the house silent, the only sounds reaching Harry's ears were the twitter of birds and the distant, pleasant conversations of the muggles still milling about the neighborhood, knowing nothing of the battle that was still raging inside the now innocent looking house. It looked as if it had never been swallowed up by the forest, as if nothing had changed from the day Rachel has disappeared. The Ministry worked their magic well.

"It seems like all the death eaters are in the house." Hermione said as soon as he reached her side. She pushed sweaty bangs away from her dirt streaked face and her eyes once again darted around the tranquil neighborhood. Harry licked his lips and nodded, his own gaze searching their surroundings to make sure more of the death eaters were crouching in the hydrangea bushes.

"Good, lets get out of here." He grabbed her hand and, keeping low to the ground and close to the shadows of the house and overgrown bushes, they scuttled across the unkempt yard. The browned lawn was high and tangled; there were sticks and bundles of thorns everywhere and they caught in their clothes, poking through the fabric and scratching at their skin. The branches of the bushes overhead kept getting tangled in Hermione's thick hair and she would have to reach up and pull the curls from the foliage. It only took the a few

seconds to reach the street but it felt like much longer, both of them expecting a death eater to pop out from somewhere with an unforgivable or somehow even worse, a member of the Order. They were nearly to the street, inching along an ivy covered fence when voices sounded directly above them. They froze, pressing their backs against the fence. Harry could feel the thorns of the vines digging into his back, his heart hammering in his chest and he and Hermione met panic widened eyes. The hand he was still holding tightened around his almost painfully and he could feel his own breath stop. They were caught. He tensed, his wand hand lifting.

“..I heard that it only took her a weekend to get them.” A rather high woman’s voice spoke from just beyond the fence.

“So they’re not hers?” Another woman gasped.

The first woman snorted. “Have you seen them? They look like two overly inflated balloons.” Both the women burst into giggles. Harry felt the tension seep out of his body and he shook his head in incredulity. Looking over at Hermione he saw her roll her eyes. Here they were trying to escape from almost certain death or at least being capture and these women were gossiping happily about someone’s...enhancements.

She signaled for them to continue on their way and they very slowly, mindful of the women just beyond the fence, continued to the escape of the street. They met the end of Rachel’s neglected lawn and after making sure none of the few muggles on the street were near or looking their way, Harry and Hermione stood from their crouch and darted to the street. Harry pulled the shrunken bike from where he had tucked it away and placed it on the ground, quickly resizing it. They didn’t even bother with the helmets. They swung onto the bike and with the throaty rumble of the motor and a squeal of tires they went speeding down the street, the muggle now staring after them open-mouthed.

The wind lashed at Harry’s face without the helmet and he had to squint behind his glasses, which were thankfully still on, and the tears the winds was now causing to stream down his cheeks only to be dried by the air. He looked away from the road in front of him and

over his shoulder, having to shake his head to dislodge the wild strands of Hermione's hair that kept blowing into his face. Rachel's house stood out like a sore thumb. The houses surrounding it were all carefully painted, the yards groomed without even a blade of grass out of place but Rachel's home looked very much like it had been abandoned. The once bright paint was faded and peeling, the yard was a mess of high grass with patches of dead brown and the brick walkway was cracked and spotted with weeds. It looked utterly and completely out of place. Once again looking at the house Harry felt the clawed hand of guilt grip his heart, squeezing with all its might. Rachel was still there, crumpled on the floor. They had left her behind. He wasn't sure how he would forgive himself for that. He started to turn his gaze back to the rose when he heard a distant pop and a sudden flash of silver reached his eyes.

His stomach dropped. His teeth clenched and the all too familiar boil of anger rolled his stomach. Dumbledore. The old man was standing on the crumbling walkway, looking as innocent as any old man, if not a little strange with the beard tucked into the waistband of his high plaid pants. He was staring directly at them. Directly at Harry. Darkened emerald and blue met and he held the old man's eyes, forcing every bit of his resentment into his gaze. *Not today old man. I don't have time for you.*

"Harry!" Hermione managed to shout over the wind. She had seen him too. "We might need to move a bit faster!"

He forcefully broke his gaze with the older wizard and focused back onto the road. He put more speed into the bike and sped from the neighborhood. Before they lost sight of the house he peered once more over his shoulder. Dumbledore still stood in the exact same spot, still looking after them, hands clasped behind his back. Seeing him and the way he watched after them without even attempting to follow after unnerved Harry. Why wouldn't he try to stop them? Another thing that was bothering him was what the hell had happened to Malfoy? He hadn't seen him since their escape from the kitchen. It just didn't make sense...

He gripped the handlebars and looked away. He didn't have time to worry about Dumbledore or anything else. Right now he wanted

nothing more than to go home but first...first they had to tell Isabelle what happened to her mother.

A/N: Thank you all for reading! I really hope you enjoyed it and that it wasn't too al over the place! No promises on the time of next chapter though, real life unfortunately catches up with you sometimes. Thanks again for reading, and thank you for you reviews! If I haven't answered them yet I promise I'll try to get to them as soon as I can.

Chapter 33

The motorbike sped through traffic with no care for traffic lights or the sounds of horns blaring after it

The motorbike sped through traffic with no care for traffic lights or the sounds of car horns blaring after it. Harry gritted his teeth and forced as much speed as he could into the bike, wanting nothing more than to put as much distance as possible between them and the catastrophe they had left behind. He swerved recklessly around the car in front of him, causing it to break hard and the driver to yell something rather obscene out of his window. The shaking hands that Hermione had clutched around his waist tightened and he could feel her nails digging into his skin but he barely noticed the slight pain and kept going. His eyes were dry and burning from the harsh wind caused by the speed of the bike but the discomfort was distant. Everything felt surreal, like what he was doing now wasn't even real, like it was nothing more than a dream and he and Hermione were really still trapped back at that house.

The bike came to an abrupt stop as it was blocked by a line of vehicles, all stopped at a traffic light. Harry growled in frustration, his eyes darting to the side as he anxiously debated rather or not he could pull the bike onto the crowded sidewalk without running anyone down. They had only been sitting at the light for a second or so and he was seriously thinking of throwing on the invisibility feature and taking advantage of the fact that they were riding a flying motorbike, despite the surrounding muggles. Before he could push the button Hermione lifted her face from where it had been pressed into his back, protecting her own eyes from the wind.

"Harry?" he tensed, keeping his eyes forward. Hermione's voice cracked as she spoke his name shakily. *'What is taking this light so damn long?'* He thought angrily, glaring at the light as if he could will it to change. He didn't turn to look at Hermione. He didn't want to talk right now, he just...he just wanted to keep going.

Hermione spoke again. "Harry." Her voice was stronger than before, despite the tremors he could still feel emitting from her body. "Harry,

listen to me...we can't go back to Isabel's." So she wasn't going to let him keep silent apparently. He sighed and looked over his shoulder at the woman behind him. Her lips were chapped, her face pale, and the wind had made her hair wilder than it had been since first year.

"Why not?" he asked hollowly. He had forgotten that they were even supposed to be heading that way. All he could think about was getting away from that house and away from Dumbledore. He had forgotten all about Isabel...how were they going to tell her what had happened to her mother? What they had let happen to her.

Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips as she shifted on the bike. "If they come after us, it would make sense for that to be somewhere we would go. They might've known that was where we got the information on R-Rachel from." She winced as she said the woman's name. "Isabel deserves to know what happened but...we can't risk it right now."

"And what should we do then?" he turned away. He knew she was right but it just felt so *wrong* to not tell her. They had made her believe that they would find out what had happened to her mother and they had but in doing so they had caused her death.

"We go home." Hermione said firmly. "Even if we don't get the chance to tell her right now we can do it later and even then, the Aurors will inform her about what happened." She sighed and he grimaced. That made them both uncomfortable. After what had happened it seemed just beyond wrong for them not to be the ones to tell Isabel, he would much prefer her hearing it from them than from anyone from the Ministry but they had no choice. He sighed and nodded once, stiffly.

"You're right."

Before anymore could be said the light finally changed and he gunned the engine again. The motorbike had an excellent pickup and they were back to speeding miles above the speed limit in seconds. Harry had no idea how exactly to get back to Grimmauld Place from the area they were in now so he drove them back towards Privet Drive. The neighborhood was quiet and calm as evening was quickly setting in and looking at it made everything somehow seem more surreal than it already did. For a moment he had to wrestle the urge

from turning down the street and just going back to the Greythorn home but Hermione's warning was still fresh in his mind. They couldn't risk it. Turning the bike in the direction they would have to take to get to Grimmauld, he sped down the road and away from the oblivious neighborhood.

It didn't take long to reach the familiar alley with the way Harry was pushing the bike but the sky had still darkened considerably. Once the bike was sufficiently hidden in the shadows of the alley Harry cut the engine and silently slid off of the seat. Hermione stiffly climbed off after him and reached up a trembling hand to push a tangled section of hair from her face. From a moment they stood in the shadows and stared at one another in silence, neither knowing what they could possibly say to one other. Harry took in her appearance; the ashen face marred by small scrapes, the windblown mess that was her hair, and the bloodshot eyes that seemed to be trying desperately to hold back tears. He doubted he looked much better. As he looked at her he felt as if something inside of him would break but his mouth stayed closed, his own eyes dark and empty. He couldn't think of anything to say to her.

Mechanically, his hand lifted and reached to gently pass over her face. The cuts faded into nothing. Hermione's lips parted to speak but before a sound could come out Harry turned away and swiftly shrunk the bike. There was nothing she could say. Nothing either of them could say would make the other feel better or make anything different.

He stowed the shrunken bike in his pocket and stepped out of the gloomy alley and into the open air of the sidewalk. With his back to the alleyway he failed to notice the way Hermione's mouth slowly closed and her eyes squeezed together briefly before she followed him out. They traversed down the cracked cement of the sidewalk in silence, Harry's gaze firmly ahead and Hermione's aimed blankly to the ground. As they walked Harry tried desperately to make any sense of all that had happened but his mind felt curiously blank. As if he already knew nothing would make any sense so there was no need to even think about it. The newfound Horcrux felt heavy in his pocket and for a moment he wondered if it had even been worth it all. For the first time since they had begun walking his eyes moved from the path in front of him and he glanced over to Hermione. She looked

so *small*...the way she was hunched into herself as if for protection and the paleness of her face and he felt a rush of guilt. She was just as confused and hurt as he was and he was ignoring her. Almost hesitantly he reached over and slipped his hand into hers, feeling how cold her fingers were and how they were still trembling. He squeezed her hand tighter and pulled her closer to his side. She looked up at him and tried to put some sort of reassuring smile on her face but it faded before it could even form. He nodded in return before returning his gaze in front. He understood.

The short walk from the alley to Grimmauld seemed to take hours long, as if the two of them were moving in slow motion and the neighborhood around them was frozen. When they finally reached the house Harry turned the knob. The house recognized him and there was the distant sound of a lock clicking open. The door quietly slid open and the couple stepped inside. The house was completely silent and dimly lit as the family of three, now four, was still at St. Mungos. It felt eerie, the usually bright and warm home completely devoid of life. Harry suppressed a shudder as for a moment the room around them appeared to warp and gain the appearance of Rachel's kitchen. He shook his head, forcing his mind sharply back to the present and ridding his mind of the haunting image. He needed to get out of there and get them both home. They made their way into the living room and over to the fireplace. Hermione released his hand and went first. She quickly flicked her fingers and lit the hearth, took the usual handful of floo powder from the container in the mantel, and threw it into the flames. As the fire flared bright green Hermione turned her back to it and looked Harry in the eyes.

"I'll see you at home then." She said quietly, her low voice still clearly heard in the silence of the house. He nodded, face shuttered. She bit her lip, her body half turning towards the fire as she hesitated. It was stupid, ridiculous really but...she was afraid to go alone. She knew of course that nothing was going to happen, she was just taking the floo straight home but after what had happened she felt as if something was going to jump out at her at any moment. Harry noticed her hesitation and the way she was now gnawing in her lip. She was still pale and though her tremors had died down some they were still apparent. The closed expression dropped and he forced a closed lipped smile. Gently, he reached over and squeezed her arm.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

Her own hand reached up and she allowed her fingers to rest fleetingly over the hand on her arm before he dropped it. She took a deep, fortifying breath and after another grateful look to Harry, she stepped into the fire. Harry waited a few moments after she disappeared, feeling more than a little nervous to be alone in the empty house, before throwing his own handful of the fine powder into the flames and flooing away. The whirlwind of movement was almost a relief, knowing that he was heading home.

As usual he stumbled as he came out of the fireplace in the Potter home but managed to catch himself before his face could meet the floor. Hermione was still brushing residue ash from her clothes when he pulled himself up next to her. For the first time since they had made their mad dash away from Rachel’s home, Harry felt safe. Some of the tension leaked almost painfully from his shoulders and he finally felt as if he could stop looking over his shoulder. It felt good to be home.

“Cattie!” Hermione’s call for their daughter pulled him from his thoughts and he blinked, looking around the room. He had kind of expected to see his little girl holed up on the couch waiting for them to return but the family room was empty. Unease began to roll in his stomach and his heart rate increased. Where was she? The house looked fine, completely undisturbed but after what he and Hermione had just gotten away from he was beyond on edge.

“Cattie!” Hermione called again, beginning to move towards the door. From the frantic quality of her voice he could tell she was feeling the same way. They were both ready to storm out of the room and find their daughter when they heard the sound of small footsteps thumping down the stairs.

“You’re home!” the excited voice of Cattie squealed as she ran into the room. Her face was bright and she was grinning as she barreled into the room, curls streaming behind her and Trouble trailing slowly. “I swear I didn’t burn anyth-” her sentence was cut off as Hermione dropped to her knees and pulled the little girl tight to her chest, pressing her face into the wild hair so much like her own. Over her

shoulder Harry could see the bright emerald of the child's eyes widen in confusion but she wrapped her arms around her mum and hugged her back anyway.

"Mommy what's wrong?" she asked. "Why are you crying?" there was a note of panic as she asked the question and Harry hurried to draw nearer to them. He moved to his own knees and Hermione lifted her head from Cattie's hair. When her face came into view Harry could clearly see the trails of moisture on her cheeks. She sniffed lightly and reached up to cup her daughter's face, pasting a shaky smile on her face. She rubbed her thumbs across the soft cheeks.

"It-Its nothing sweetheart." She tried to reassure, despite the way her voice wavered as she fought back tears. Cattie frowned as her eyes took in her mother's appearance. She was young but she wasn't stupid, she knew something was wrong. She could see how ragged both of her parents were. She didn't like this. Her eyes darted from Hermione's face and to Harry's, looking up at her Daddy with some sort of pleading expression. He could see she was ready to panic. Cattie was a sensitive child, especially after all she had been through and she hated to see anyone hurt.

"It's okay, Kitty-Cat." He put in his very best to muster a smile for his little girl. He wished he had thought beforehand about what she would think seeing them like this, he didn't want to scare her. "We were just a little worried, that's all." The little girl frowned at them skeptically for a moment before putting her hands on her hips.

"Why? I told you I wasn't going to burn anything again." Both Harry and Hermione laughed at her indignant expression, Hermione's laughter more choked than his, and Harry leaned forward to press his lips to the top of the child's head and wrap his arms around both of his girls. His lips lingered there longer than usual. In that instant he somehow felt even more thankful for Cattie than he ever had. She was their bright light in the darkness, the only thing in that moment that kept him from sinking into the despair and guilt he could feel waiting to overwhelm him just at the edges of his mind. Reluctantly, he moved away from them and stood from his crouch. He felt the brief bit of warmth and comfort that he had spread through him while being near his family leave him. He would love to just stay there with

the two of them and pretend that all that had happened had been nothing more than a very bad dream, that the world beyond the walls of their home wasn't slowly falling into chaos and waiting for him to save it but he needed to get out of these clothes. There were holes, dirt, and on the inside of his right sleeve there was a large drying bloodstain. Rachel's blood. Thankfully Cattie hadn't seen it. He also needed to get the Horcrux, which was still in his pocket, to the dueling room where it would later be destroyed.

As Harry made to leave the room Hermione caught his eye meaningfully. He held her gaze for a moment before his eyes darted away. He understood what she meant; they needed to talk about what happened. The thing was that was about the last thing in the world he wanted to do right now. He nodded quickly and stepped out of the room, he just wasn't ready to talk about it now. As soon as he moved into the hallway he gave himself a moment to attempt and gather his scattered thoughts. He really hadn't been thinking that coherently or really at all since he and Hermione had jumped on his bike. All he could possibly think about was getting away and getting home. But now that they were back home and safe...he didn't want to think at all. He knew that as soon as he started he wouldn't be able to stop, the memories and the guilt would just come crushing down on him and he couldn't take it.

His legs felt heavy as he dragged himself up the staircase and it seemed to take ages to just reach the landing. He made his way to his and Hermione's bedroom, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him. The sudden silence and emptiness of the bedroom made him feel...out of place. His mind was still partially stuck in escape mode and the calm familiarity of his room shocked him, threw him off balance. He felt his body begin to tremble, sweat began to bead on his forehead, his breathing became shaper and shaper until it started coming in short gasps. As his vision seemed to swim his knees gave out and he leaned hard against the door behind him, sliding to the ground bonelessly. He drew his knees up to his chest and leaned his forehead on them, clutching at the fabric of his jeans as he gasped for breath, trying to force the oxygen into his lungs. He squeezed his eyes shut and desperately tried to calm himself. What was this? What was wrong with him? He suddenly felt all the adrenaline that he had been running on leave him, replaced by the suffocating fear he had

ignored during the battle and their escape. He couldn't handle it. He couldn't breathe. He felt himself pitch forward onto his knees and the breakfast he had consumed that morning found its way onto the spotless floor. He retched until his stomach was completely emptied of its contents and still he heaved. He struggled desperately for breath, a twisted sound ripping from his chest, even he wasn't sure if it was another gasp for air or a sob. He leaned back, dropping back onto his rear and wrapped his arms around himself as he tried to stop the violent trembling of his body. This was the second time he had come so *close*. So close to being caught or killed and so much worse; close to losing Hermione. She could've been killed and it would have been his fault, Rachel was killed because of him. Goodness knows this was not the first time he had been involved in a fight with death eaters and definitely not the first time he had to helplessly watch someone die but instead of becoming easier it was getting harder and harder to handle. It was becoming harder to stop it.

His hands reach up and clutched at his hair. He was supposed to be strong, powerful, so why did this keep happening? How did he keep letting them get so close to death and capture? What kind of 'savior' was he if he couldn't even protect his family and himself from harm and he continued to fall into these traps. He couldn't keep letting this happen. Was he really that *weak*?

He waited until his tremors lessened and he was able to breathe a little easier before he shakily pushed himself back to his knees, nearly swaying again. He grimaced at the mess on the once clean floor, more than a little embarrassed by his loss of control, and with a flick of his wrist he quickly cleaned it. With that little bout of magic he sagged again and for a split second his vision blackened. It was if he had used the very last bit of his strength just for that. He had to grip the doorknob to pull himself to his feet. His small panic attack combined with the mess they had gone through and all the magic he had used had weakened him to the point where he felt as if he would faint right there on the floor. He felt like he had just run a marathon while recovering from the flu.

He dragged his worn body over to the wardrobe and laboriously pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. They felt like lead in his hands. He had to take a breath as he leaned against the wardrobe,

almost not wanting to continue the walk to the bathroom that was only a few feet away. With a groan he pushed himself away from the wardrobe and continued his trek to the bathroom. Before reaching the door he stopped by the small sitting area. He carefully pulled that beautiful little teacup from the pocket of his jacket and gently placed it on the coffee table. He stared at it for a moment. How could something so small and pretty hold something so dark and evil? Turning his back on the Horcrux, he opened the door to the bathroom.

As soon as he stepped inside he stripped the clothing from his body. He winced more than once as he tugged off his clothes, he hadn't noticed just how battered his body had gotten during the battle. There was more than one spot where he could already see bruises forming and he felt cuts in places he hadn't even noticed being injured. When he was freed from his clothing, he made to step into the shower when he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. For a second he didn't recognize himself. He blinked and moved towards it, gripping the cold marble of the countertop and leaning forward so he could peer closer at his face. He looked a fright. He didn't think he had ever been so pale and the pallor of his skin made the small red scratches of his face look even more livid and painful. His tongue darted out and poked at the cut at the corner of his lip as he tried to figure out how he had even gotten it. His hair was, if possible, wilder than usual from the bike ride and strands of it were clinging to his sweaty face. He winced. There was no way Cattie had really believed that everything was okay. Once again he thanked the powers that be for his child. He doubted any other child would have understood enough not to have asked more questions about what had happened to them.

Sighing, he turned from his reflection and turned on the shower. The water warmed instantly and he stepped inside and into the spray. He had to bite his lip to keep from crying out when he was blindsided by sudden pain as the heated water streamed across his skin and into the various cuts and bruises. The heat relaxed his tensed muscles in a near painful way but he reveled in it, happy to get rid of the blood and grime that had streaked his skin. He wasn't sure how long he had stayed inside the shower but when he finally stepped out the bathroom was completely filled with steam. He was grateful not to be able to see his reflection again; he doubted he actually looked much better but at least he smelled better. It hurt more to pull his clothes on

than it had to take them off. He left the dirty things on the floor, knowing the one of the house-elves would get to it. Usually he and Hermione tried their best to give as little work as possible to them, much to their chagrin, but right now he just didn't have the urge or the strength to bend down and pick them up. He had a feeling that if he went down he wasn't getting back up.

He limped out of the bathroom and back into their bedroom, he wasn't sure if he felt better or worse for the shower. While he was more than grateful to be clean, now he could feel every single cut and bruise on his body. His muscles were absolutely *screaming* at him. He didn't even bother to try and shuffle his way over to the large bed at the far end of the room, opting instead to just lower himself painfully into one of the armchairs near the coffee table. He gritted his teeth as the fabric of his shirt rubbed against a particularly nasty bruise just below his left shoulder. He was sure now. It was worse. How he would love to just heal his wounds but he had more than exhausted his magic and his body today. He couldn't muster a bit of strength to do it.

His head dropped to the back of the chair and he stared with half open eyes at the teacup still sitting innocently on the table. He should probably bring it to the dueling room now and get prepared to destroy it. He almost snorted. There was no way in hell that he would have the strength to even attempt such strenuous magic and he had no doubts that Hermione was not in much better shape than he was. '*Hermione...*' he sighed. She was still going to want to talk. What was he supposed to say? How was he supposed to explain to her how he had failed so horribly *again*? He wouldn't be surprised if she wouldn't forgive him. Every time they turned around he was leading them both into another trap and every time she was almost killed. The last time he had put the life of their child at risk. Who could forgive him for that? His eyes closed tightly and a shudder ran through his body. Even the thought of what could have happened...

"Harry?" the voice jolted him out of his guilt ridden thoughts and his eyes shot open. While he had been busy agonizing, Hermione had slipped into the bedroom. She was standing near the door, looking over at him with more than a little worry. Yeah, now he was sure he didn't look much better after the shower. He sat up from his boneless

slump in the armchair, wincing in pain as he did so, and gave her a rather miserable attempt at a bright smile.

"Hey." He tried for casual but his throat was still raw from his retching earlier. Hermione's worried frown deepened and she began walking over to him. Worriedly, he noted the tentative way she moved her body. She was probably just as worn out and sore as he was. She came over to the chair he was sitting in and leaned against the armrest, putting her weight on it and she tiredly nudged her shoes off with her toes. He caught her wince as she did so. He reached out his arm, ignoring the twinge in his shoulder as he did so, to wrap it loosely around her waist. She released a soft rush of air from her nose and sagged against him, her back leaned against his arm and her head turned so that their foreheads were leaning against one another.

"You alright?" Harry asked lowly, his thumb rubbing absentminded circles on her waist.

Hermione sighed again, shaking her head. "Should I be?"

"No...I guess you shouldn't be." He sighed himself. "Where's Cattie?"

"I sent her to bathe and get ready for bed. It is getting late." She answered. It really wasn't that late, though it was getting near Cattie's bedtime, but the both of them were beyond exhausted. They spent another short moment in heavy silence. Reluctantly, Hermione withdrew herself from his grasp and he allowed his arm to drop into his lap. She gasped audibly as she did so, leaning over and a hand flying to her stomach in pain. Harry was on his feet in a second, despite his own aches. He grasped her arm carefully, in the event of there being anymore injuries on her body. "Hermione, are you alright?" Stupid question, she was obviously not alright. She straightened with difficulty, lifting a hand to wave him off. She forced a smile on her suddenly pale and sweaty face.

"I'm fine." Her fingers prodded at the spot on her stomach and she flinched. "It's just a bit of a bruise. Not anything to worry about." Not really believing her, Harry slowly released his hold on her arm. Seeing his disbelieving look she smiled at him again. "Really, I'm fine. I'm going to go and take a nice hot shower, hopefully that'll help." She

stepped away from him and began making her way to the bathroom door. He watched her step inside with a frown and when the door closed behind her he sighed heavily, hands reaching up to clutch almost painfully at his hair. He squeezed his eyes shut. He allowed himself to slump back into the armchair and leaned forward to he could rest his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. This day just got worse and worse. Hermione was even more hurt than he had first thought. He had hoped that only he had been the one to get the worst of it but he still didn't know exactly what had happened to her when she was being chased through those cursed woods by the death eaters.

He dropped his hands from his face and leaned back onto the soft cushion of the chair, which felt more like sandpaper to the shallow wounds on his back. He sat there for what felt like forever, staring blankly at the cup still perched on their coffee table. He wasn't really seeing it. His mind was a thousand miles away as he tried to sort through his thoughts enough to figure out what to later say to Hermione in explanation. He knew that once she was out of the shower there would be no way for him to escape the inevitable conversation. He was so focused on his thoughts that he was once again caught off guard, this time by the other important lady in his life. He felt a tug on the sleeve of the arm he had hanging over the side of the chair. He jumped; starting so much that startled the little girl standing by his chair. She stared at him with wide, surprised eyes and he forced his heart rate to slow. He gave a small smile to the little girl, the first genuine smile since they had returned home. It was easy to smile for Cattie, the little girl always managed to lift his spirits whenever he saw her.

"Hey there, Kitty-Cat." He greeted her. She returned his smile immediately, the shocked expression from before dropping.

"Hi Daddy." She chirped. She padded around from the side of the chair and to the front of it. Without hesitation, forgetting again about the pain in his muscles, he reached down and lifted the pajama clad little girl. He almost dropped her from the sudden rush of pain in his arms and over his shoulders but he bit his lip, not wanting the little girl to see that he was in pain. He lifted her into his lap and she beamed

up at him. His pain was quickly forgotten and he couldn't help but smile widely down at her.

"What brings you by my dear lady?" she giggled, rolling her bright eyes and her nose wrinkling. Stopping her giggles, she frowned sternly up at him.

"I was waiting for you to come and give me my goodnight kiss." She tilted her head. "What took you so long?"

He wrapped his arms around her, bringing her close to his chest and dropping a kiss on her forehead. "I'm sorry, luv. Daddy was a little...busy." He really was sorry, how could he forget something so important. Their goodnights weren't only important to Cattie but to him too. Goodnight kisses were something he could never remember getting himself and he never wanted to miss out on something so special with his own daughter. "I'll never forget again."

The child shifted so she was looking squarely into his eyes. "You promise?" she asked solemnly, looking way too much like her mother. He leaned forward so that their foreheads pressed together,

"I promise." He would never miss another moment with her, not if he could help it. Her bright smile returned.

"Good." He laughed, leaning over the press a kiss on her cheek before leaning back against the chair.

"Did your Mum already say goodnight to you?"

"Yep."

"Good, then go to bed."

"Oh, *why*? I'm not even tired yet." She whined, pouting and crossing her arms defiantly. He laughed again at her little show of petulance, reaching up to tug a her braid.

"Go on, do as I say."

She huffed once before sliding off his lap. He gave her another kiss on the top of the head before nudging her on her way. "Goodnight Cattie, I love you."

"Love you too, Daddy." She sighed. He watched with a loving smile and she shuffled out of the room as slowly as she could, hoping in vain that the pitiful expression on her face would somehow convince him to allow her to stay up longer. It didn't work. He would have liked to have carried her to bed and tuck her in but he knew his body was in no such condition to do so. When he was absolutely sure she had gone on to her room he painfully pushed himself from the armchair. He was so *tired* and everything just hurt so badly. He just wanted to climb into bed and never come out again. Maybe if he was in bed when Hermione came out of the shower he would be able to avoid the conversation for a little bit longer, at least until his mind had fully grasped what had happened.

He was just beginning to drag himself over to the large bed at the far end of the room when he realized something. Hermione had been in the shower for an awful long time. Turning away from the ridiculously tempting sight of the bed he shuffled over to the bathroom door.

"Mione?" he called through the dark wood of the door. There was no answer. He knocked twice. "Hermione?" he pressed his ear against the door and distantly he heard the sound of the shower running but there was still no answering voice from within. For what seemed like the thousandth time that day, he felt panic. He knocked again. "Hermione! Please answer...I'm-I'm coming in." hesitantly he grasped the handle and turned. The door easily swung open and steam rushed out at him. He stepped into the humid bathroom and had to blink for a second to see through the mist. At first he saw nothing as he peered about the bathroom but when he stepped farther in he was able to see the shower.

"Hermione..."

She was still inside the shower, the water still running. She was leaning against one wall of the shower just out of reach of the spray, her knees pulled to her chest and her hair clinging wetly to her flushed skin. He inched closer to the edge of the shower and dropped

to his knees. Hermione lifted her face from where it was pressed against her knees and looked at him. She squinted at him through the thick steam.

“Harry? What are you doing in here?”

“I-I was calling you and you didn’t answer. You were taking so long I...I got worried.” He felt himself blush and he scratched at the back of his neck. Okay, maybe he had overreacted just a little bit but she did still look like something was wrong. “I’m sorry. I’ll...just...get out.” He made to stand up, careful not to peer too closely at her when she interrupted him.

“Wait!” he stopped and looked back at her. Her knees were drawn closer to her body and she was biting her lip.

“What is it?”

“Could you...Could you...help me?” she whispered, staring down at the tile of the shower floor.

He froze, about a thousand thoughts that he shouldn’t really be thinking rushing through his mind. What exactly did she mean by ‘help me’?

“Umm...”

She shifted and he could see her wince. His jumble of hormonal thoughts disappeared instantly and he shifted closer to the shower in worry.

“I can’t move.” She whimpered. “It hurts too badly.” She was hiding her face from him but he could hear the suppressed tears in her voice. He felt his heart clench in pain and guilt. Her voice sounded so small...

In silence he reached an arm into the shower to turn off the steady stream of warm water and the bathroom was suddenly plunged into silence, the only noise the steady drip of water from the shower head.

"I'll be back." He murmured to the young woman still huddled against the wall of the shower. He stood up and stepped over to a cabinet that was much like a small closet in the corner of the room. He reached inside and withdrew two large, fluffy white towels before moving back over to the shower, one slung over his shoulder and the other in his hand. "I'm going to come in, ok 'Mione?" he said awkwardly. He had never seen Hermione in...such a state of undress but she looked so vulnerable that at the moment his mind couldn't think of anything other than getting her out of the shower and making her feel better. Luckily the tile of the shower floor was spelled against slipping because it was slick with water as he stepped inside. Once again, he kneeled in front of her, ignoring the moisture seeping into the knees of his sweatpants. "Can you move a little bit?"

She shook her head, causing more droplets of water to fall down her already damp face. Her eyes were aimed at the floor and her arms were still wrapped around herself. She was carefully avoiding his gaze. He knew that she hated him having to see her like this, Hermione had always prided herself on being able to take care of herself and now to need him to help her get out of the shower...she was more than a little embarrassed.

"Oh, okay then." Slowly, he inched closer and reached for her with the towel. He wrapped it carefully around her shoulders and moved even closer to her, until he could feel the heat rising from her skin. With a pained gasp, Hermione dropped her arms from their position around her knees and lifted them a bit so he could wrap the towel completely around her body. He felt heat at the back of his neck and he knew he was blushing, his eyes quickly averted to the top of her head as he secured the large towel around her. Yes he loved her and yes they were engaged but...he still didn't want her to catch him staring. When he was sure that she was securely wrapped in the towel he reached out an arm to slip it under her knees.

"Are you ready?" the last thing he wanted to do was take her by surprise and hurt her even more. She licked her lips before taking a breath and nodding.

"Yes." He tried to lift her as carefully as possible, his own arms trembling from the strain on his sore muscles, but still she let out a

yell as he stood with her in his arms, her entire body tensing at the pain. Her fingers clutched at the fabric of his t-shirt and her eyes squeezed shut. A tear leaked out from beneath one closed lid.

“Oh god! Hermione, I’m sorry!” he said, voice high in panic. She shook her head haltingly as a shudder passed through her body.

“Not...your...fault.” She managed to gasp out. He waited a moment until he felt her body relax slightly in his arms, feeling helpless, before moving. He moved extra slow, careful of every step he took as not to jar her too much as he carried her out of the bathroom. He moved her all the way over to their bed before lowering himself onto it, sitting as carefully as he could. A whimper still managed to escape as he shifted onto the bed. He apologized again in a hushed voice, brushing his lips fleetingly on her cheek. He managed to shift her without hurting her, so that her back was resting against his chest, pulling his arm from behind her back. With his now free arm he reached over and stacked some of the pillows against the headboard.

“I’m going to have to move you again, okay?” he said when he finished. He really didn’t want to have to move her anymore than he already had, it obviously hurt her a lot and he couldn’t help but feel like he was the one causing it. If both of them had been in top shape, not having used so much magic in such a short amount of time, neither one of them would be in as much pain right now and they would at least be able to heal themselves.

“Okay, it’ll be fine.” She reassured him softly. He steeled himself before gradually lowering her against the pillows, so that they were supporting her back. This time she didn’t make a sound but once again her entire body tensed. Harry slipped the towel that was still draped over his shoulder into his hands. Hermione’s hair was still dripping wet from the shower and droplets from her thick curls were trailing down her face. Tenderly, he wrapped the second towel around her head, fluffing it gently to dry the mass of moisture darkened curls. He kept his eyes on her pale skin as he lifted a corner of the towel to softly wipe away the water on her forehead and cheeks. As he tended to her, Hermione caught his gaze with her own, it was the first time she had truly met his eyes for more than a second since he had carried her from the bathroom. The room had settled

into a warm, soothing silence in the moments they had been sitting on the bed. Her hand lifted from where it had been resting on her stomach to gently grasp his wrist. Her smile was small but genuine and loving.

“Thank you, Harry.”

Her voice didn't break the comforting silence around them, the softness of it instead seeming to blend in and add to the warmth of the moment. Harry's answering smile was wider than hers and just as loving. He removed one of his hands from the towel to cup her cheek and lean over to press his lips to hers, his eyes closing. He felt her body sag against his, the hand on his wrist tightening ever so slightly, her lips molding to his own and he sighed against her mouth. Kissing Hermione always filled him with such comfort and peacefulness, for moment the conflict and the turmoil he was feeling inside completely faded away. It was like coming home. She suddenly deepened the kiss a bit more, allowing one of her hands to rest on the side of his face, and he felt warmth spread from the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

“No problem. It's what I'm here for.” He said lowly as they pulled away, still staying inches apart. Her fingers were still wrapped around his wrist and she gently began rubbing small circles on the exposed skin there.

“I'm glad. I'm glad you're here Harry.” She said it with such conviction, even with the quiver in her voice. The hand still on his wrist tightened once again, to an almost painful degree and Harry stared into her face. Her lips were pressed so tightly together that they had turned white with the strain as she tried desperately to curb the sobs that were trying desperately to break through. The tremors that had faded away when they had returned to the safety of their home were beginning again, shaking her small bruised form. It was then that Harry knew for sure that she had been just as terrified as he was. All he could do was stare at her, his breath stolen by the sheer helplessness he could see in her face. A harsh sob finally broke through her lips and Harry snapped out of his daze. Both of his hands cupped her face, bringing her face closer to his as her entire body shook with the force of her sobbing. Once again his lips met her skin,

her cheeks, her eyes lids, her chin, every spare inch of skin he could find on her face he kissed, whispers of 'I'm still here.' And 'every thing's going to be alright.' Tumbling from his mouth between kisses. He remembered how terrified he had felt just a short while ago and he needed Hermione to know that he was there, that the *both* of them were okay. All the while Hermione kept her hold on his wrist. He pulled away but locked his eyes onto hers.

"I won't let it happen again, Hermione." He wouldn't ever be so foolish again. He wasn't going to be weak and he was never again going to hesitate. "I won't put you in that kind of danger again. I'm so, so sorry."

Hermione shook her head, well as much as she could with his hands still cupping the sides of her face. "Harry." Even though her voice was still slightly choked and she sniffled, it was firm. The strength in the way she said his name throwing him for a moment. She was suddenly glaring at him, her cheeks still dampened by tears, and he blinked in confusion. "You can't keep doing this. You can't keep thinking that it's solely your job to protect me from all harm and that it's all your fault when something *does* happen." Her other hand came up to grasp his other wrist in the same manner as the other. Her glare softened and her lips quirked into a small smile.

"I have the ability to take care of myself Harry. I can't sit in a corner and allow you to protect me all the time. Harry...we love each other; we're getting married. That makes us partners and as such that means that it can't just be one of us trying to protect the other. As a team we protect *each other* and when it comes to something like this not only one of us can take the blame." She could see the obvious urge to object in his expression so she hurriedly continued on. "I have the mind enough to have been prepared for that attack, to have at least thought that something was going to happen. If anything we're both at fault." The smile dropped and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "If you should've known what was going to happen then should I have too. In hindsight it seems so obvious that after what happened in Italy they would have followed us there. Everyone has always said that I'm so smart, if I am how could I not have seen it coming? *I'm* sorry, Harry. I'm sorry that I got you hurt." He shook his head just as vigorously as she had.

"No 'Mi, it's not your fault. How could you have known?" that little smile returned to her face.

"Exactly. While neither one of us could've know for sure what was going to happen we still should have been prepared for something to happen." She looked at him pleadingly. "Please Harry, just this once...let me share some of the blame. You can't carry every thing bad that happens on just your shoulders. Even though it doesn't look like it now, mine are pretty strong too."

It was a long moment as he stared back into the eyes still gazing pleadingly at him before he slowly, grudgingly nodded.

"Okay." He conceded. "Next time, we'll both do better." She leaned forward and kissed him again.

"That's all I wanted to hear. Just remember, we're in this together." Hermione released the hold on his wrists and Harry slid his hands from her face, though not before pausing to caress one of cheeks tenderly. It was moments like these that he was reminded just how much she meant to him, just how much he needed her. "I love you, you know that right?"

"I know, I love you too."

He smiled and she returned it. He moved back a bit and she shifted her body, one of her now free hands gripping at the towel still wrapped around her and wincing. Harry slapped himself mentally. In those few minutes he had forgotten that she was still in pain, not to mention damp and still only wearing that fluffy towel.

"*Shit*, I'm sorry Hermione!" he gasped. She shot him a sharp look.

"Language, Harry." She shook her head. "I'm fine." He peered at her doubtfully, especially when he saw her hand got to that spot on her stomach as she shifted again. How he wished he had enough strength left to heal her but he was drained.

"If I felt a little better..." he sighed.

"What about DeeDi?"

He stared at Hermione blankly for a moment before she rolled her eyes in expiration. "Really Harry. House elves have magic, she could probably heal us both." She frowned. "Though it seems kind of rude to bother her..." it was his turn to roll his eyes.

"I don't think she's be too bothered Hermione. Asking DeeDi, that's a really good idea...why didn't I think of that?"

Hermione quirked her brows. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Rolling his eyes again, he ignored her. "DeeDi." He called. In a mere second there was an audible pop and the matronly house elf popped into existence near the foot of the bed. The elf seemed to take no notice of the state of near undress Hermione was in, beaming at the young couple happily.

"Yes, Master Harry? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

Hermione leaned forward so she could peer around him, wincing for the thousandth time but still smiling kindly to the elf. "Yes DeeDi, we're terribly sorry to bother you but...we got in a bit of an accident and we were both wondering if you would be so kind as to help heal our injuries?"

DeeDi gave a gasp of shock at the thought of her two young masters being injured and she nodded so vigorously that Harry wondered if she would harm herself. She moved closer to where they were sitting at the head of the bed. "Absolutely of course! Oh, what has happened to Masters Harry and Hermione?!" she tutted. With all the care of a mother tending to her child, the elf lifted one of her long fingers and waved it slowly around Hermione's abdomen. Hermione let out a small gasp and for the first time in the past two hours she straightened fully.

The elf proceeded to do this over the rest of her body, near her shoulders and over her legs. Harry could see the profound relief on her face as she was finally free of the pain. DeeDi stopped and took a step back, beaming up at Hermione. She rotated her shoulders and stretched out her legs with a happy little groan and Harry grinned not to see that pained little wince again.

"Oh, *thank you* DeeDi!" Hermione thanked the elf sincerely, keeping hold of her towel as she leaned down the hug the house elf. DeeDi's already large eyes widened at the wholly unexpected show of affection but those eyes quickly began to fill with tears. Harry's smile widened. Where all house elves so easily emotional?

"No need! No need to thank me at all Mistress Hermione!" Hermione pulled back and smiled kindly down at the elf, her hands on her small shoulders.

"You did something I'm very grateful for so of course there is need for thanks." Her hands dropped from the elf's shoulders. "Would you please heal Harry too, DeeDi?"

"Only if you're not too tired." Harry interjected quickly and once again the elf shook her head. Hermione shot him a pleased look over her head. DeeDi proceeded to follow the same procedure she had went through with Hermione over his body and Harry nearly sagged against the bed in relief as the throbbing pain in his muscles faded, he could practically feel those livid bruises that had found their way all over his body begin to disappear. As soon as the elf finished he completely understood why Hermione had hugged her in such a way. Being free of that pain was such an intense relief! He could even feel a very small amount of his energy returning to him. The effects of the elf's magic.

"Thank you so much DeeDi." Before he could even think to hug her himself, DeeDi suddenly launched herself at his legs. She pulled back quickly and beamed back up at him with an amused face, a spot of color on each cheek.

"You're very welcome, Master Harry. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

He shook his head fondly. "Not right now DeeDi. Please, go and take a rest. And thank you again."

The elf bowed her head before smiling at the both of them again. With a pop they were once again alone. Hermione slid off the bed, chuckling as she padded barefoot to their wardrobe, still holding up her towel. Harry leaned back on his elbows on the bed, watching after

her and noted how carefully still moved, as if she was still expecting to be in pain. He also noticed how she was moving slower than usual. While DeeDi had been able to heal her of her injuries she was still worn out, he knew he still felt ready to drop off to sleep.

“Harry!” he realized belatedly that she had been speaking to him, and he had been staring at her the entire time. He felt heat rush to his cheeks and he smiled sheepishly, still keeping his eyes on her.

“Yeah? I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said.”

She had a hand placed firmly on her hip and she was looking at him with a raised brow. “I asked you if you had forgotten what we had to do tonight?” once again, she was met with a blank stare. “*Really* Harry. The DA.” He nearly slid off the bed as he sat up quickly, eyes the size of coins.

“Shit!”

“Language Harry.” He ignored her rebuke, cursing again as he jumped to his feet. He had to send a silent thanks to DeeDi for the fact that he could stand without the urge to collapse on the floor. He had completely forgotten about the scheduled DA meeting that night, set to begin in less than ten minutes. After all they had went through today who would expect him to remember and how the hell was he supposed to teach them anything when frankly he doubted he had enough strength left to perform more than a ‘lumos’ tonight.

“What do we do?” he asked her frantically, a hand running agitatedly through his wild hair. In comparison to him, Hermione was calm as she tugged a pair a deep red cotton pants and a white long-sleeved shirt from the wardrobe.

“I guess for tonight we can just,” a wide mouthed yawn cut off her sentence. She shook her head tiredly, blinking widely, and continued. “Do some discussion of spells for tonight.”

He groaned and leaned back against a bedpost. The hand in his hair dropped from the dark strands and ran tiredly down his face. “Hermione...I don’t think I can handle being around anyone tonight. Not after what happened.” He wasn’t sure he could talk and smile

with anyone after nearly being killed, after watching Rachel die. Hermione sighed, nodding in agreement.

“Really, I don’t think I can deal with it either right now but what can we do? It’s a little too late to cancel now.”

“Couldn’t we just use the coins?”

“No, they’re all probably on their way here already.” Another yawn split her face. “I’ll just go get dressed and I’ll meet you downstairs. We’ll just do discussion tonight and let everyone else practice with each other.”

Harry shook his head, pushing himself away from the bedpost. “Just go on to bed, ‘Mi. You can barely stay on your feet; I’ll work with the DA tonight.”

“You’re not in much better shape than I am Harry, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

He shook his head again. Just looking at her and the way she was blinking more and more at him, he could see that she was more than ready to crash. “Maybe so but there’s really no reason for the both of us to tire ourselves out anymore than we already are. Just go on to bed, I’ll be in later.” She stared at him for a moment with pursed lips, eyes narrowed but she could see from the stubborn set of his jaw that there was no way he was budging on this and frankly, she knew her body wouldn’t be able to stand being awake any longer. She needed sleep desperately. She had used just too much magic that day.

“Fine.” She grumbled. He grinned and walked over to where she was still standing next to the wardrobe. He dropped a lingering kiss on her forehead and placed a hand on the back of her neck to squeeze gently.

“Thank you. Get so sleep, okay?”

“I’ll try.”

He watched until her towel clad body disappeared into the bathroom before he allowed a rush of air to leave his lungs and he sagged

against the wardrobe. He was so *tired*. He couldn't let Hermione see how worn he actually was or there would be no way she would let him handle the DA alone tonight. She needed to sleep, even though she was no longer in pain he knew that she was still magically wrung out. They both were and the only way to solve that was a good few hours of sleep. Unfortunately, it seemed like it would be a little while before he would be able to take advantage of the luxury. He blew air between his lips. He would just have to keep this meeting as short as possible. He gave a last, longing glance to the large bed just a few steps away before forcing himself away from the wardrobe and through the bedroom door, grabbing his discarded shoes on the way out.

As he held onto the topmost banister of the staircase on the landing, tugging his shoes over his feet, Harry tried to think over how he was supposed to drag himself through the next hour or so of the DA meeting without passing out on the floor. Maybe he should just give them a list of spells and send them on their way? He snorted. He doubted any of them would take that; they probably would refuse to leave until he taught them something. Maybe he should tell them he was sick before they started, they would understand his fatigue then and he doubted anyone would protest if he wanted to end their meeting early. He sighed as his now shoe clad foot dropped to the floor. The thought of doing that made him feel more than a little guilty. After the attack he and Hermione had went through that day it reaffirmed his belief that they all needed to be more prepared. They couldn't risk missing any chance to learn more ways to protect themselves, to fight. The wizarding world was just getting too dangerous. But he was next to useless in his current state, what could he do? He thought for a brief moment before an idea hit him. He wasn't sick but he knew something that could help...

He raised his hand, fully preparing to summon the item he needed when he remembered that he didn't have nearly enough strength for that. He growled deep in his throat and turned to began jogging in the direction of the stairs leading to the third floor. He gritted his teeth at the tired muscles in his legs strained as he moved up the stairs. He didn't even wave a hand at the portraits as he jogged down the short corridor. He pushed open the door to the potion's laboratory and moved as quickly as he could to the cupboard. He knew he only had

a minute or so before the DA members began arriving. He scanned the shelves of the cupboard, glad that everything was clearly labeled, before selecting a vial of Pepper-Up Potion. He pulled out the cork stopper and immediately sneezed at the near unbearably strong spicy scent. He felt as if it was singeing his nose hairs. He bit his lip as he peered down at the vividly colored potion in his hand. He wasn't even sure if it would work. *'It wouldn't hurt to try.'* He glanced down at the potion and winced. *'Okay, it might hurt a little.'* He clenched his hand and steeled himself.

"Bottoms up." Without giving himself anymore time to hesitate he held his breath and put the edge of the vial to his lips and gulped it down. Fire. Pure fire raging down his throat. He coughed and coughed, he could feel sweat pouring down his face and there was a high-pitched squealing noise in his ears. His free hand flew to his throat, as if that would do anything for the burning there. He could feel his nose beginning to run and he forced himself to breath through his mouth. The burn lessened quickly and he was finally able to breath, sniffing as he did so. He blinked red rimmed eyes blearily and when his vision cleared he took a moment to take stock of his body. He felt...better. He stretched his arms over his head, rejoicing in the feeling of renewed energy. He didn't feel up to his usual level but he definitely felt better than he had moments before. This type of energy was also...different. It was like taking some sort energy pill, it wasn't natural. He had a feeling that it wouldn't last long.

Experimentally, he lifted the hand with the now empty bottle and with it laying on the flat of his palm he moved his free hand above it. It took more concentration than usual but very slowly, it float up from his palm. He couldn't stop himself from letting out a triumphant 'Ha!' at that small bout of magic. The victory was short-lived. He was only able to keep it floating for a mere moment before it dropped back onto his palm. Okay, so the Pepper-Up potion had done only a little for his magic, he would still need actual sleep to remedy that.

He tucked the empty vial into the pocket of his sweat pants before jogging out of the lab. With the new rush of energy he was able to add on an extra bit of speed as he passed through the corridor once again. He ran down both flights of stairs, this time without that strained feeling in his legs, and made it into the family room just as a

familiar red head tumbled out of the fireplace. As Ron pushed his way to his feet Harry crossed the room to give him hand, grasping his arm and pulling him to his feet.

“Thanks, mate.” He grinned, brushing residue soot from his school robes. Harry stared at the black fabric for a moment. He had forgotten...if was already two weeks into September. As he looked at Ron in his uniform he felt a brief flash of envy. He couldn’t return to Hogwarts, not now with Dumbledore there but...the place had been his first real home. The place where he met his first friends. A part of him was always going to miss being there.

Ron’s voice pulled him back to the present. “You okay?”

Harry blinked, then shook his head slightly and smiled. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He dropped his hand from Ron’s arm. The room was enveloped in a thick, awkward silence. They avoided each other’s eyes. It had been a long time since they had been alone together. While he, Ron, and Hermione had talked things were still...different. There still seemed to be a wall between them. Ron scratched nervously at the back of his neck.

“Um, mate?” he broke the silence.

Harry shifted. “Yeah?”

“I was, I was just thinkin’ that...” a spot of color appeared on his cheeks. “That maybe we could, I don’t know, talk or something? Later, after the meeting?” Harry blinked in surprise. Ron was never one to actually volunteer to talk about anything and from what he see from the other boy shifted about and the way he was avoiding his eyes, this probably wasn’t going to be an all together lighthearted conversation. For a brief second he wanted to say no. Even with the extra boost of energy from the Pepper-Up potion he still wanted nothing more than to go to sleep as soon as the meeting was over but...if Ron wanted to talk he was more than willing.

“Sure, mate.”

They shared a bright, if somewhat awkward smile before the fire in the hearth once again flared green and another red head appeared.

This time it was one of the twins, stepping out of the fireplace and into the room with quite a bit more grace than his youngest brother. Before Harry even had a chance to greet him, his twin came fairly trotting out after him. The first twin barely had a chance to move before the second bowled him over.

“Oi! Fred, you trying to kill me?” the first twin, now revealed as George complained as he brushed soot from his jeans. The second grinned unashamedly at him.

“Course not George! Though with you out of the picture I’d finally be one of a kind.” He barely dodged the punch his twin aimed at him. Seemingly deciding to ignore his brother, George stepped forward and gave Harry a hearty slap on the back, nearly knocking him off balance.

“Harry! How’re doing ol’ boy?”

Rubbing his shoulder, he grinned at the red head. “I’m...fine. How about you?” George shrugged, still smiling brightly.

“I can’t complain.” He turned slightly to look back at Fred, brows furrowed. “Hey, where’s Gin? I thought she was coming right after you?” Fred shrugged himself, turning to frown at the barely flickering flames in the hearth.

“I don’t know...she was right behind me. I’ll go back and see where she is.” The worry was clear in his voice. Ever since the attack at Diagon Alley the entire Weasley family had grown even more protective over their two youngest siblings. Just as he was turning to head back to the fire it flared once again and the third Weasley of the night tumbled out. Fred caught her quickly, before she could hit the ground. Harry froze. He watched with lips tightly pressed together as Fred helped her to her feet.

“Hey Harry.” Her voice was small as she greeted him once she was standing, her eyes firmly set on the flooring between his feet.

“Er, hey Ginny.” He responded awkwardly. It had been...a while since he had last seen Ginny let alone said anything to her. He hadn’t really even spoken to her since that...incident at Remus and Tonk’s

wedding. Truthfully he had forgiven her for that, not for all the things she said about Hermione, but he had forgiven her for the most part but that didn't make this any less awkward. "What brings you here?" Really, like he couldn't guess what she was here for. Ginny pulled her eyes from the floor and finally looked at him, a glint in her eyes and her jaw set as she glared at him. His brows rose at the fierceness in her expression.

"I'm here to learn how to protect myself. Just like everyone else." She said it with so much venom but he had a feeling it wasn't directed at him. Well, at least not all of it. He nodded once, slowly. He understood where the fierceness was coming from. She had been attacked, weakened. She never wanted to be in a situation like that again. He could respect that.

"Good. I'm glad you are." The glaring expression dropped from her face and her eyes widened in surprise. What? Had she expected him to turn her away? From the look on her face he could guess that she had. He gave her a short, polite smile before turning back to face the fire. The rest should be arriving soon.

It only took a few more minutes for the rest of the DA members to arrive. Other than the new addition of Ginny, it was the same people from before. After greetings and a short amount of banter were passed around, Harry directed everyone to follow him to the dueling room. Seeing as it was her first time there, the youngest Weasley child gaped as she surveyed the home.

"Hey Harry, where's Hermione?" Neville asked as they stepped onto the second floor. The others seemed to notice her absence for the first time. Well at least most of them, he was sure Ron had noticed the lack of Hermione's presence earlier.

"Hermione...wasn't feeling too well tonight so she headed to bed early." He supplied, keeping his eyes forward as they descended up the stairs to the third floor.

"Really?" Cho spoke this time from her spot on his left. He glanced over at her at the surprising note of concern he detected in her voice. He didn't think she and Hermione had gotten along all that well in the short moments they had spoken to one another and after her, rather

true in hindsight, accusations during the extremely short period he and Cho has dated he had thought she didn't liked Hermione.

"Yeah, but she'll be okay." He smiled. Cho returned his smile and he was relieved to see that he didn't feel that tremor in his stomach he had been plagued with all through fourth year and a good portion of fifth. Oh, she was still just as pretty as ever is not prettier and her smile was just as lovely but...those feelings were gone. He had Hermione, who he was completely and utterly in love with.

She pushed back a tendril of shiny black hair and squinted at him. "You don't look all that well either Harry. Are you sure that you're up to it tonight?" she had dropped her voice as she spoke to him, so those following behind them couldn't hear. Ron, on Harry's right might have heard but who knew with the way Luna was prattling on at him about some new article her father was writing for the Quibbler. Harry dropped his own voice, giving her a reassuring smile.

"I'm fine, just a little tired. I'll be okay for tonight." She looked doubtful but she nodded. He smiled to himself as they reached the third floor. It was weird, he would think that there would be more awkwardness between him and Cho but....there was none.

Catalina seemed to be ignoring him and Bronson was pouting rather childishly as they made their way to the dueling room and Harry felt a flash of guilt about the way he had been ignoring them earlier. Really, they didn't *actually* have feelings. They were portraits after all. He sent them both an apologetic smile anyway. The group of teenagers filed into the dueling room, the few that were wearing them quickly discarding their school robes before everyone settled on the cushions. Harry dropped onto his own in front of him. He doubted he would be able to stand too long so why waste energy?

"So what are we doing tonight, Professor?" Lee asked brightly from his lounging position on his cushion.

Harry grinned, rolling his eyes at the title and the light laughter coming from around the room. "Well, I know it doesn't sound all too exciting but I was thinking that maybe tonight we could work a bit on shielding spells."

Lavender wrinkled her nose, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder. "We already know shielding spells." Harry barely resisted the urge to roll his eyes, Ron didn't bother and they exchanged an amused glance.

"I'm not talking about learning shielding spells. I'm talking about learning how to hold them and strengthen them." He turned his gaze from the girl and back to the rest in the room. "Sometimes you can be overwhelmed by enemies, death eaters, and you can't fight back. Sometimes the best course of offence is defense. If you can protect yourself long enough to give yourself time to think it can potentially save your life. Most shields are easy to cast but it's a lot harder trying to keep 'em up when you have a thousand spells coming at you at the same time. So that's what we're going to be working on tonight." He grabbed onto the edge of the platform behind him to push himself to his feet. "So! Everyone find a partner. One person cast a shield and the other shoot as many spells at them as you can at one time, at full power. Later we'll switch. Now guys, nothing that could potentially disfigure or add limbs that can't be removed." He sent a pointed look over to the twins who looked back at him with exaggerated affronted expression.

"Why we've never been accused so blatantly!" Fred sniffed. George nodded, hand to his chest.

"And by someone we consider another unneeded little brother no less!"

The easy laughter in the room kept the atmosphere light as everyone found their partners. When he saw that everyone was paired up, Harry spoke.

"Okay, start." In seconds shields were called up and spells were flying. Harry circled the room slowly, proud to see that everyone still had their shields up under the barrage from their partners. He was getting more and more impressed when the first shield went down. Seamus went flying across the room as a powerful '*Impedimenta*' from Dean broke his shield, his sliding to the ground kept the spell from hitting him in the chest. Everyone stopped to look over at the boy now slumped on the floor. Dean rushed over and leaned over him.

“Are you alright, mate?!” Seamus looked up at him and snorted.

“Peachy.” Dean was grinning as he reached out an arm to help his friend to his feet. The Irish boy was rubbing his bottom as he was pulled upright and he sent a glare to the rest still watching them.

“Nothin’ for you to look at, go on with what you were doing.” He ignored the laughter from his classmates as he went back to standing in the spot he had been knocked from. Harry fought to keep the grin from his face as he made his way over to the two boys. The others went back to their practicing.

“So what happened, Seamus?” from the look the other boy gave him he was failing in keeping the amusement from his face.

“I got knocked on my arse, what do you think happened?” Harry didn’t even bother to keep the grin from his face then, especially at Dean’s barely disguised snort of laughter.

“What I meant was, what were you feeling right before you got ‘knocked on your arse’ as you put it?”

Seamus tilted his head thoughtfully, scrunching his nose as he thought. “Well, I don’t really know. I was fine at first but then I started feeling drained? It took a lot more energy than usual to keep up the shields when there were spells comin’ at me.”

“Exactly.” Harry answered, nodding. “When spells are being cast at the shield it puts strain on the magic you’re using to keep it up. It pulls the energy from you, tires you out and when it does that it weakens your shield. If the shield gets weak, it breaks and you’re screwed. The best thing to-” his sentence was cut off as Padma fell to Cho’s spell, her shield breaking as she fell with a thump to the floor with suddenly violet hair. Grinning again, he raised his voice so she could hear him too.

“The best thing to do is not to think about the spells that are coming at you but at solely keeping the shield up.” He raised his hands at the skeptical look he was getting from Seamus. “I know, it doesn’t sound like much but it makes a whole lot of difference. When you’re thinking about the spells that are coming at you, you subconsciously start

adding unnecessary power *into* the shield instead of using that power to work on just keeping it in place. Believe me, it works. How about you guys switch up now, you too Cho and Padma.” As the partners resituated themselves, Harry continued on his circle of the room.

In the next couple of minutes four more people’s shields were broken. Angelina, Lee, George, and Lavender. Harry gave them the same advice he gave Seamus and Padma and they switched places. Ron and Luna were still going strong when he passed them, though he could see sweat beading on Ron’s forehead as Luna shot spell after spell at his shimmering blue shield. He was about to advise them to switch themselves when he heard a frustrated noise from a bit behind him. He turned around to see Ginny seeming to have dropped her shield, hands on her hips as she glared with irritation at a sheepish looking Neville.

“Neville!” She growled and he flinched. “Stop it! I know you’re going easy on me.”

Harry stepped over to them. “What’s wrong?” Ginny pointed an accusatory finger at the boy across from her.

“It’s him! He’s totally not putting everything into his spells. He’s purposely throwing weak spells at me.” Harry turned to said boy with a brow raised in question.

“That true?”

Neville shrugged. “I didn’t want to *hurt* her.” He muttered, blushing. Ginny let out an explosive sigh, bangs flying up at the gush of air.

“Geeze Nev, I’m not made of glass. I can handle it.” Her hand dropped from her hip and she slid back into dueling stance. “Now, we’re going to try it again. Don’t you dare go easy on me because I won’t return the favor!” Neville looked over at Harry with a helpless glance and he grinned.

“Go on, you have to give it your all mate.” He clapped him on the shoulder. With his mouth still twisted in a grimace, Neville moved back into position.

“Okay.” He muttered. Ginny’s shield went up and with a deep breath Neville let loose. Harry could see Ginny’s eyes widen behind the shield as the first spell hit it. She had to shift her feet to keep her stance from the strength of it. Harry nearly laughed. Too many people underestimated Neville. The boy was strong, he had a lot of power and now it was even more apparent with his new wand. He left them to it and continued his trek around the room.

They continued on like this for another hour or so, switching partners ever so often as Harry kept an eye everyone’s progress, giving pointers and advice when needed. From what he could see, the twins, Ron, Cho, Neville, Parvati, Ginny, and somewhat surprisingly, Luna had a lot of power. They all held their shields up the longest and it took stronger and stronger spells to get them down. All in all it wasn’t that much of an eventful meeting but everyone still felt pretty satisfied as the meeting ended.

“Okay, that was pretty good everyone.” Harry said as people began to gather discarded school robes. “I think at the next meeting we’ll work some more on the shields but maybe with spells that are a bit more...dangerous. Death eaters won’t be throwing simple jinxes at you.”

Justin snorted as he stretched, arms overhead. “Ya think?” his arms dropped. “So when’s the next meeting?” Harry pursed his lips as he thought.

“Um...how’s next Saturday for you guys? Same time?” there was murmurs of agreement from the rest. “Great. Thank you all for coming, I guess.” It came out a bit more awkwardly that he had planned and color rushed to his cheeks at the resulting laughter. He shot them all a mock glare. “If you’re all going to laugh at me you can get out of my house!”

“I have to be leaving anyway.” Lee said, laughing as he threw the tie he had taken off earlier over his shoulder. “I have a three foot scroll due for McGonagall in two days.” He grimaced. “I probably should’ve started working on that when she assigned it to us last week.” Fred laughed and slapped his friend on the back.

“Good luck with that one, mate. I’m glad me and George are out of Hogwarts, we rarely have to think at all now.”

Angelina grinned at him and elbowed him in the side. “Who said the two of you ever used those brains of yours in the first place.” He threw an arm around her shoulder, returning her grin with a wide one of his own.

“Ah, but Angie my dear, I used my brain constantly at Hogwarts! How else would I think about you?” he gave her an exaggeratedly lecherous wink and she snorted, jabbing her elbow a bit harder into his side. The grin never left her face though. Harry could see Ron’s nose wrinkle in disgust. George pushed his way between the two as he headed towards the door.

“If the two of you are done flirting, we have to head home.” He quipped, throwing a wink over his shoulder at his now blushing twin.

The rest of the group followed George out of the room, chatting amongst themselves as they descended to the first floor. It wasn’t long before the DA members were making their way through the floo and back to Hogwarts, one after the other until the only ones left were Ron, Ginny and Cho. She held a handful of floo powder in her hand but before she threw it in she turned and looked over at Harry.

“Tell Hermione that I hope she feels better, okay?”

He nodded. “Sure. I’ll tell her.” She smiled thankfully and once again he was reminded of how lovely she was. She lifted her empty hand and gave a little wave to him.

“See you next week then.” She turned to the flames and threw in the powder. “**Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Room of Requirement!**” and she was gone.

“Do you want to go first Ron?” Ginny asked her brother as the flames settled down. He shook his head.

“Nah, you go on ahead Gin. I have something I need to talk to Harry about.”

“Oh. Okay.” She looked between the two. There was a short but very awkward pause as the girl caught Harry’s eyes. Her gaze quickly dropped to the floor. “I guess I’ll...see you next week Harry.” She mumbled quickly. She grabbed some floo powder and tossed it in, stepping into the hearth.

“Er, see you later Ginny.” She flooed away without looking at him. Without Ginny there the room lapsed into an uncomfortable silence at the two friends were left alone. Inwardly, Harry sighed. He remembered a time when everything between the two of them was easy. Now everything just felt all weird. Ron was fidgeting with a lock of hair near his ear and Harry noted that it was getting a little long. His lips twitched. Mrs. Weasley was probably having a fit that so many of her sons were adopting the long hair.

He was debating whether or not to say something, to break the silence that had been going on much too long, but...Ron was the one who said he had something to talk to him about. He’d wait for him to say something first. Thankfully he didn’t make him wait much longer. The other boy, who had been avoiding his gaze by looking around the room, gestured to the chess table and chairs in the corner of the room.

“Care for a game?”

Harry grinned. “Sure!” he had missed playing chess with Ron, okay more like losing chess to Ron but he still missed it. They crossed over to the table and he sat down, Ron across from him. The board was surprisingly a muggle chessboard and already set up to play. Ron prodded one with a finger.

“How do you play this thing?” Harry laughed, grinning at his friend.

“Just like regular, except you move them yourself.”

Ron frowned at the board, prodding his knight again. “Doesn’t sound like much fun.” He muttered and Harry couldn’t help but laugh again.

Once again, they lapsed into silence as they began the game but this time it wasn’t awkward, it was comfortable. For the first time in a long time, it felt like how it used to be. They continued moving their pieces

about the board for nearly a minute before Harry decided to prod Ron a little.

“So, you said you had something to talk about?” he kept his eyes on the board as he spoke, keeping his voice casual. He saw Ron’s hand pause as he went to capture one of Harry’s black marble pawns but still he kept his eyes on the board. He knew it would probably be harder for Ron if he was looking directly at him, not to mention...he was starting to feel a little nervous himself.

“Yeah...I do.” Ron coughed, shifting in his seat as he continued the game and captured the pawn. “Look, I know that me, you, and Hermione have already talked or whatever but things still aren’t the same are they? They’re still not like how they used to be.” Harry shook his head slowly, dropping his hand from his rook and into his lap. He looked up and saw that Ron had been watching him. They met each other’s eyes.

“No. No they’re not.” He said quietly.

The redhead’s own hand dropped from the board. “But-But I want them to be. And I think that for us to be friends again, there’s something I have to say but please...don’t interrupt me alright?” he gave him a pleading look, the smile on his face unsteady. “I think if you stop me I won’t be able to start again.” He took a deep breath, as if preparing himself to plunge into murky waters. He looked back down at the board, absentmindedly fiddling with the pieces. “Okay, after you and Hermione disappeared I was really scared you know? At first anyway. I thought that something had happened and that you guys were hurt but then...when there wasn’t any news of anything I got really mad. I just *knew* she was with you, that you guys had left me behind and guess what? I was right.” Blue eyes flew up from the board and Ron glared at Harry and he flinched. He didn’t flinch at the obvious anger in those eyes; it was the pain he could see behind it. The betrayal. “You’re my best friend Harry, *my best friend* so I thought you would know and that you wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Know what?” he croaked, his throat suddenly dry. There was a sinking feeling in his stomach, a itching at the back of his mind...

Ron scoffed, leaning hard back in his chair as he ran a hand through his vivid hair with obvious frustration. "Are you kidding me? *Hermione*. I've liked her." It was like a slap to the face. He had known, in a distant part of his mind that Ron had...felt something for Hermione but he had never really *thought* about it. He had ignored it and Ron had never brought it up...There was a silence as Ron waited for him to say something but he couldn't. All he could do was stare down at the chessboard in front of him, trying to figure out what he was actually feeling. Seeing that Harry wasn't going to say anything, Ron continued.

"Since second year I've had these...feelings for her. I didn't think too much about it, other than the weirdness of it with her being my friend and all but I guess a part of me always thought that we'd, you know, end up together. I figured that one day I'd ask her out and she'd say yes and then we would be together but then...her parents died and I wasn't even allowed to talk to her and then...she disappeared. With you. When I saw you at Diagon Alley with Cattie and she looked like Hermione I just-I just couldn't believe it! You guys had disappeared without a word for months and then you show up with a bloody *kid*?! What the hell was I supposed to do? I had never been so angry in my entire life. Then to top it off you completely brushed me off, like I was nothing to you anymore."

"Ron..." he held up a hand, stopping Harry's words.

"Hold on, I'm not done yet." Ron slumped forward and looked across the board to his friend. The anger had drained from his face and all Harry could see was hurt, naked in his expression and he felt like he had been punched in the gut. He had never seen that look on his face before. "And then at Remus and Tonks's wedding, I had been planning that when I saw the two of you I was going to apologize and things were going to go back to normal but then I saw Hermione with that ring. It was like you had stabbed me in the back. No, it was worse than that. It was like you had stabbed right in the bloody forehead and I had to watch you coming at me the entire time. I didn't know if I loved Hermione but I still felt like you had snuck in and stolen her away from me. But you know, even that wasn't worst part of it all." He stopped at a croak there, his throat choked with barely suppressed tears and Harry would be lying if he said that he didn't

feel a burning behind his eyes. He swallowed hard. "T-The worst part was that you both had changed. I could see it. You were different people on a completely different world than I was and you had started a *family*. Without me. It was like I wasn't important anymore, neither one of you needed me and if you guys didn't need me...what was I supposed to do? I felt *lost*." His eyes dropped from Harry and all he could see of him were his clenching fists as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying desperately to keep the tears from coming. All Harry wanted to do was reach over the board and hug his friends, apologize like he had never done before. He had never really thought about what exactly Ron was feeling and now that he knew...saying that he felt guilty would be the understatement of the century.

"Ron, I'm so sorry. I didn't...I'm sorry but I just didn't think about how you were feeling. I'm sorry we hurt you. But Ron, you have to know that no matter what I'll always need you. You're my best mate. Yeah, Hermione and I have changed but we never once forgot you and we never stopped missing you. We've all been friends for so long that the fact that you weren't around...it felt like something was missing. I've missed my friend." Ron looked up, smiling a watery smile.

"I've missed my friend too."

Harry returned the smile but he needed to keep talking, he needed Ron to understand. "And when it comes to Hermione, I didn't mean to hurt you and I didn't know how much you liked her Ron but...I love her." He saw his friend wince but he muscled on. "She's the love of my life and the mother to my child. We're going to get married. I'm sorry if we hurt you but it was not something we planned. Do you...do you still have feelings for her?" he really didn't want to hear the answer to that question, he had a feeling he already knew the answer. Ron shifted in his seat and he shrugged somewhat helplessly.

"I-I think so." He said softly. Harry nodded in acceptance. He had thought as much. "I don't think that I love her but a part of me still...feels something, you know?" he shook his head. "It's just that I liked her for so many years I can't just *stop*."

"It's alright Ron, I understand and I don't expect you to suddenly forget your feelings. I just want you back in our lives."

Ron smiled, nodding firmly. "Sounds good to me." Harry reached over and knocked him gently on the shoulder.

"Then, do you want to come over for lunch or something tomorrow? Just, hang out I guess?" Ron broke into a full out grin.

"Of course! It's a Hogsmead weekend so no one should notice if I'm gone. I'll be here. Er, is like 12:30 okay?"

Harry grinned himself. "Yeah, 12:30 is fine."

"Great." Ron's eyes darted over to the clock on the far wall and he rather reluctantly began to stand. "We'll have to finish our game tomorrow, its already past curfew."

Harry began standing himself, giving his friend a mock shocked look. "And since when did Ron Weasley care about rules?" Ron laughed.

"Since that great greasy bat Snape started patrolling the hall twice as much lately. He's been especially happy now that you're not at Hogwarts anymore."

The smile dropped from Harry's face and he froze. "Hey Ron, keep an eye on Snape alright?" Ron's brows furrowed in confusion.

"I always avoid him, what's with that face?" Harry shook his head.

"I'll tell you about it later, just promise to keep away from him as much as possible."

"Sure mate, whatever you say."

They walked over to the fireplace and Harry watched as Ron grabbed a handful of floo powder from the jar on the mantel. He turned to look back at Harry. "So, I'll see you tomorrow then." There was a short pause before Harry reached out and pulled Ron into a strong, brotherly hug. It was quick and when they pulled back the both of them were blushing but they grinned at one another. Harry took a step back.

“See you later, mate.” He threw the sparkling green powder into the flames and stepped inside. ***“Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Room of Requirement”***

And then Harry was left alone in the room. He leaned against the armrest of the couch for a moment, watching as the residue flames from the floo flickered and died. He felt different, as if a weight he hadn't even realized he had been carrying had been lifted from his shoulders. He was finally on the way to getting his best friend back, to restoring the 'golden trio' but at the same time...the battle from earlier was still lurking at the back of his mind. It dampened the happiness he felt at getting things out in the open with Ron. He sighed heavily and rubbed tiredly at his eyes. The energy from the Pepper-Up potion was beginning to drain from him. He was exhausted. He pushed himself away from the couch and began shuffling towards the door. Now all he could do was head to bed and hope for a good night's sleep. The lights dimmed behind him and he made his way towards the stairs.

A/N: Finally! A new chapter! And a ridiculously long one at that, I think I might be getting a bit to wordy. I had to cut out two scenes just to cut it down to 16,000 or so words. I'm sorry it took so long, I've realized that I might just be a terrible procrastinator and it was my new year's resolution to cut that out but as you can see...it took me this long to finish this chapter so you can tell how that's going. I'm working on it though!

Anywho, thank you all for your reviews, they do mean a lot to me and I read every single one. I'm made a promise to myself to answer all of those I have yet to so if you sent me a review a long while ago don't be too surprised to get a random message from me within the next few weeks

Also, a little while ago someone suggested to me that I could use a beta reader and I'm thinkin' that's true so if anyone who can would like to offer me their services I'd love to have you! Thank you again for reading and reviewing, I promise I won't keep you guys waiting so long again.

Chapter 34

'Where am I

He was walking. His steps were slow, as if he was stepping through sludge and he couldn't seem to make himself stop moving. All around him was a deep darkness but he could still see the faint outline of towering trees. They were pale and skeletal looking things the seemed to move and sway in a wind he could not feel. Everything was silent, even the sound of his steps crushing the dead leaves on the ground below was silenced but his own heavy breathing rung loudly in the still air around him. It was all so familiar yet he couldn't seem to figure out where he was. The most distressing part of it all was that he could not stop his feet from moving. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't stop his steps. He could feel a sense of urgency and a choking fear was crawling up his spine but yet, his movements were still slow.

'What's going on? Where am I?'

His thoughts were a jumble in his mind, twisting and tumbling over one another in a confused mass and the urgency within began to grow. In the distance he could see a dim light, the first break in the darkness he had seen in what felt like hours but instead of feeling relieved to see it the fear grew. He needed to get there though. He needed to be there. His steps were excruciatingly slow. He needed to get there faster. Something was going to happen and he had to stop it, he felt as if he failed to get there quick enough his entire world was going to end.

After what seemed to be forever he finally stepped into the light and was nearly blinded by the shockingly harsh brightness of it. He was suddenly standing in the middle of a clearing of deadened grass. It was as bright as day, almost burningly so, yet the sky above was still black as pitch. Abruptly sound returned. A scream, a heart wrenching scream that cut him to the very core sounded across the clearing. Just a few strides away, appearing as if they had been there the entire time and he had just failed to notice them was a death eater and the one person that he had not expected to see. Hermione. She was slumped against the death eater who had an arm around her

neck and instead of a wand he was holding a dangerous looking dagger against the pale skin of her neck. He could vividly see a thin red line marring her skin as the knife pressed harder and harder. Her eyes were wide and wild with terror as she stared across at him.

“Harry!” she screamed, sobbing. “Help me!”

He opened his mouth to yell back, tried to force himself into motion so he could run to her and save her but...he couldn't move. His muscles refused to cooperate and no sound would emit from his mouth. His panic rose and he strained with everything within him to take control of his own body but he couldn't. He couldn't get to her.

*“Harry **please!** Why aren't you helping me?!” she was struggling against the death eater but she couldn't free herself. She looked at him with such confusion and hurt.*

*“Yes Potter.” The death eater hissed. It wasn't a voice he recognized, more like a combination of the voices of several death eaters he had come in contact with. Snape's voice the most distinctive. “Why aren't you trying to save your little mudblood? Is it because you don't really love her? Or maybe...you're just **weak.**” the death eater's arm moved from around her neck but one hand still kept the blade to her throat. One of the death eater's hands reached up and ran down Hermione's face, her neck and the front of her robes. She shuddered in disgust and tried to pull away but once again, she couldn't get free of his hold. The desperation in her eyes grew.*

“I can see why you would keep her around though Potter; she is a pretty little thing. For a mudblood anyway. I bet I could show her what a real man is.”

Hermione screamed. “Get him away from me! Harry, get him away! Why are you just standing there?”

*Inwardly he sobbed, he begged for her to understand that he just **couldn't**. Why couldn't he move? Was he really so weak that he couldn't even save her?*

“Well Potter, aren't you going to come and save her?” the death eater's free hand slowly inched up to Hermione's head and he

gripped her hair. She let out a pained shout, tears were streaming down her cheeks as her head was roughly tilted back to fully expose her neck. The death eater rubbed the flat side of the blade almost tenderly up and down over the exposed skin and Hermione strained all she could to back away from the deadly instrument but she couldn't even move an inch. As the death eater toyed with her and Harry, out of the corner of his eye he could see figures appearing amongst the dark line of trees at the edge of the clearing. More death eaters, making their way into the clearing. As they moved in they shouted jeers, and curses, obscene things about Hermione that made Harry want to launch himself at them. What chilled him to the bone though, was that they were calling for her blood.

"Should I spill her blood here Potter? So we can all see just how filthy it is." The death eaters roared in approval and Harry wanted to scream. He was trying with all his might to force his body to obey him, to call up every ounce of his magic to save Hermione and kill every single death eater there but he was completely frozen.

"Please." It was a mere whisper but it carried across the clearing louder than every other shout she had made, it rung over the din of the death eater's voices and still...he was helpless to save her. He watched, still struggling and feeling as if he was being torn to pieces as the death eater straightened his knife and swiped it across Hermione's neck with one, clean sweep. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened. She seemed to be gasping for breath but it only came out as a wet gargle as blood poured from her wound and down her front. The death eaters were absolutely screaming now, like a pack of bloodthirsty animals but it was nothing but a dull buzz at the back of Harry's mind. The death eater carelessly released Hermione and she fell to her knees.

He could hear it. The thump of her knees hitting the earth, the wet rasping of her last gasps for air, the sound of her heart beat slowing and stopping. The entire time her widened eyes were locked onto him. There was no more fear, no anguish or pain, just...betrayal. Accusation. He had let her die.

Even though the death eaters around them were moving at normal speed, Hermione's body fell to the ground in a slow, graceful arc. As

she fell the spell that had been keeping him in place broke and instantly he fell to his knees. Sobs shook his body with brutal force but he scrambled to his feet, ignoring the jeers from the death eaters as he ran towards Hermione's broken body. He kept running and running but he didn't seem to be getting any closer to her body but her eyes, they continued to glare at him. He opened his mouth, lips wet with tears, to yell.

"Hermio-"

Harry was torn from his sleep, the shout still on his lips and he jolted up in the darkness of his bedroom. He was disoriented, gasping in half sobs for air as he tried to remember where he was. Fear and despair was all he could feel and his body trembled with it. It was a few seconds before his brain realized that he was no longer asleep and a few seconds more to realize that it had been a dream. Trying to control his shaking, he shifted over in the bed to peer down at the body lying next to him and a sob tore from his throat to see Hermione still sleeping peacefully, the steady rise of her chest a sure sign that she was still breathing. The relief was tangible and he pulled himself as close to her body as he could, laying his head on her chest so he could hear her heart beating steadily within. The tears came unbidden as he continued to shake, the only thought in his mind, 'She's okay, she's okay, she's okay' running through over and over and over again. He just needed to be sure; he just needed the reassurance of her heart still beating to push the image of her death from his mind.

It was a good long time before he could force himself to move away from her and he was thankful that there was no way she would awaken. She had woken him only a few short hours ago when she had her own nightmare and she had been so shaken that they had eventually resorted to having Manny bring them a Dreamless Sleep potion for her. How he wished he had taken some for himself.

He looked down at her face and shuddered again, placing a still unsteady hand on one of her cheeks. It had all seemed so real. Watching her die like that...helpless to stop it, he had felt like he was dying himself. The way she had looked at him in the dream and how she had pleaded with him. He loved her so much and he hadn't been

able to do anything to save her. *'That death eater'* His hand dropped from the soft skin of her face and both hands clenched into fists at the thought of him. If he could have he would've ripped him limb from limb, ever single one of them. How many times had just that thing happened to someone else? How many people had to watch as their loved ones were killed by those monsters?

His hands were beginning to shake now and he was beginning to feel that all too familiar rush of cold in his veins. He could already feel the power ready to overtake him. He needed to get out of there, out of the room right then and there before he ended up doing something he regretted. He nearly fell as he threw himself out of bed, stumbling across the hard wood to the door. The bedroom door flew open before he even thought to reach out and grab the handle and he staggered down the hall, still trying desperately to control himself. Every time he blinked he saw Hermione's lifeless body falling to the ground, the blood staining her clothes and the ground beneath her, the death eaters cheering as her life faded away. He gasped as another wave of that exhilarating power nearly brought him to his knees. He continued on. The stairs were a quick, if not unsteady climb as he ascended to the third floor and to the dueling room. Once again the door was thrown open by the force of his magic and it slammed closed behind him as he stepped inside. It took only a slight thought from him for one of the dueling statues to hop off of its shelf and resize. He didn't even take note of which one it was, all he remembered was a sword coming at him before he lifted his hand and it was ripped from the statue's grasp, sent flying into the nearest wall and the statue soon followed it, bursting to bits as it impacted with the wall. Harry slashed a hand through the air and two more statues sprang to life and rush him. He waited for them as they ran towards him, eyes narrowed, before directing a hand at each of the animated figurines and with a twitch of his fingers, lifting them into the air. It took a twist of his wrist to send the two figures crashing into one another with a resounding crash, more bits of marble to join that of which was already littering the floor. One after another he called up more of the statues and one by one they were destroyed as Harry unleashed his anger, until all were destroyed.

His breath was coming in harsh gasps as he stared down at the destruction around his feet with darkened eyes. The power still

thrummed in his veins, pulsating in the palms of his hands so he could scarcely keep them still but it all felt different. It *was* different. Instead of the usual way that the power would seem to take him completely over, this time he had known exactly what he was doing. He worked with it instead of allowing himself to surrender to it. He lifted his hands and stared down at his palms as shock ran through him. He had *controlled* it. He clenched his hands into fists and allowed his arms to drop back to his sides, excitement running through him. He had controlled it! If he could, if he could gain complete control over this power he would never have to be weak again.

He unclenched his fists and slowly, a tight lipped smile grew on his face. For the first time in a long time he was beginning to feel like he had a chance, a chance to actually end this war. He knew that finding the horcruxes and destroying them was the key to finally defeating Voldermort and while he felt like he was doing *something*, nothing had changed. They were destroying the horcruxes but if anything things were just getting worse and worse, people continued to die. Now though, if he could control this power he could do more. He had a fighting chance.

With the power still thrumming beneath his skin he lifted one hand and waved it through the air, heart pounding in his ears. The pieces of the shattered statues trembled on the ground before swiftly moving back together, repairing themselves until every statue looked as if they had been untouched. Instantly all of the statues crouched into dueling positions, lined up in front of him as they waited for him to make a move. His eyes narrowed and his smile widened into a grin. He was going to be in control this time. With no more thought, Harry lifted both of his hands and charged towards the statues.

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It was three hours later when Harry made his way out of the dueling room, shirt plastered to his skin with sweat but feeling an energy that kept him bouncing on the balls of his feet. He sent a chipper 'Hello' to Bronson and Catalina as he jogged through the corridor down the stairs, intent on heading back to his and Hermione's bedroom for a shower to rid himself of the sweat on his skin, when he nearly ran into

said woman. He had to grab the banister at the bottom of the stairs to keep himself from stumbling into her and sending them both tumbling to the ground.

“Oh!” Hermione gasped in surprise. “I was just coming up to find you.” A smile appeared on her face as she tilted her head back to look up at him. For a moment all he could do was stare down at her, his breath leaving him as those images from his dream came rushing back. It was such a sharp contrast. In the dream, the eyes looking up at him had glared at him with such hurt and betrayal but now the warm chocolate pools were full of warmth.

The loose jeans and long sleeved white t-shirt she wore, along with the light smile on her lips and the way her curls rested loosely around her shoulders, made everything about her seem calm and peaceful. Before he knew it his arms were around her and he had pulled her to his chest. He pressed his face against her hair, squeezing his eyes shut as he tightened his grip. *This was real, this was Hermione.* Not the girl from the dream. Her arms came to wrap around his waist as she rested her chin on his shoulder.

“Harry?” her voice was soft as she breathed against his ear. “Are you alright?” with a short chuckle he pulled back a bit but reached his hands up to cup her face, rubbing his thumbs over her freshly washed cheeks as he smiled down at her.

“I’m fine. Now, I’m fine.” He caressed the smooth skin one more time and then released her.

Her eyebrows lifted but she nodded, the hands resting on his waist squeezing gently before dropping. “Good, now go and take a shower. You stink.” She stepped back with a wrinkle of her nose. “When you’re done come join Cattie and I for breakfast, then you’ll tell me exactly what you’ve been up to.”

He gave her an exaggerated salute before giving her a quick peck on the cheek and sauntering around her. “Your wish is my command.”

“And don’t you forget it!”

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His shower was quick and it only took him a minute or so to dress himself in jeans and a grey jumper before he was heading back out of the bedroom. He could hear Cattie's voice even from the staircase as he walked towards the dining room. He grinned as he heard a childish giggle and stepped inside the sunlit room. Cattie was sitting across the table from her mother and she was throwing grapes into the air, trying to catch them with her mouth. As he entered the room a grape hit her on the forehead and she burst into giggles again.

"Be careful." Hermione warned halfheartedly, trying to smother her grin as another grape smacked Cattie on the nose.

"I am." She picked another one from her plate and threw it into the air but before she could attempt to catch it again, Harry reached out and snatched it from the air and popped it into his mouth. The little girl let out a mock-outraged 'Hey!' that dissolved into high pitched giggles as Harry promptly leaned over to give her a tickle. He plopped down into the chair next to hers.

"That was mine." She pouted as her giggle faded.

He winked. "You want it back?" she wrinkled her nose and Harry grinned as he had a sudden flashback of Hermione's same expression only a few minutes ago. The child popped another grape into her mouth. Still grinning, Harry turned to Hermione who had been watching the two of them with amusement from across the table. He could just catch her smile over the rim of her teacup. She lowered the cup the table when she saw he was looking at her.

"So, why were you up so early this morning?" she asked him casually. His smile faltered slightly and he looked down as his own plate of breakfast appeared in front of him. Grateful for the distraction, he dug into his omelet, chewing slowly as he thought of how to answer. He didn't want her to know about the dream, the last thing he wanted to do was add to her worries.

"I...had a dream and since I was up I decided to head up to the dueling room." He kept his tone as casual as possible as he continued to eat but over his fork he could see Hermione's brows furrow. She wasn't fooled. He looked meaningfully down at Cattie, who was carefully slicing her own omelet into bits and picking out

what he guessed were tomatoes, and back up at Hermione and she nodded. He'd tell her when Cattie wasn't around. He was reaching into the little glass bowl of fruit next to his plate for a slice of melon when it was snatched just from under his fingers. He looked over to see it disappearing into Cattie's mouth.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, trying to hide his smile with a mock angered expression. She promptly stuck her tongue out at him, half chewed melon clearly seen in her mouth. Harry couldn't help a snort of laughter and Hermione frowned at the little girl but he could see in her eyes she was fighting a smile.

"Catherine." She admonished firmly. The little girl immediately swallowed and grinned at her mother. Shaking her head, Hermione took another sip of tea. "So, what do you two want to do today? I was thinking we could go and see Remus, Tonks, and the baby. They should be going home sometime this afternoon and I told Tonks we'd visit them." Cattie nodded vigorously.

"Yeah! I want to see Jack again."

Harry nodded, it sounded good to him. Then he remembered Ron. "Um, actually we should have a visitor today." Hermione frowned in confusion; she hadn't known anything about this. Cattie had put down her fork and she was watching them both with interest, they didn't really get many visitors at their house.

"Who?"

Harry shifted, avoiding her eyes. He wasn't sure how well she would take him inviting Ron over without even talking to her about it. He was sure she wouldn't be too upset about; it was Ron after all but...well they still had a history of sorts. "Ron. We talked a bit last night and I invited him over. Is that okay?" Hermione blinked but nodded, slowly.

"Oh. Of course, that's fine. What time is he coming?"

Inwardly, he sighed with relief. "Around 12:30 or so. It's a Hogsmead weekend so no one should take much notice of him not being around." They had quite a while before he should be there, it was only a little after 7am right then.

"Ron your friend?" Cattie piped up. Hermione nodded.

"Yes, you remember him right?"

"*Yeah.*" She rolled her eyes, practically scoffing. "I like him."

"How do you know you like him?" her mother asked, brows rising.
"You only met him once." The child shrugged.

"I don't know, I just do and you guys told me all about him." She turned to look at her daddy. "How long is he going to stay?"

"I don't know for sure, he's going to stay for lunch though."

"Okay." She pushed away her plate and drunk the last of her milk and both dishes disappeared. "I'm done. Can I go to my room?"

"Go on." Harry ruffled her already tussled curls. She slid out of her chair and fairly skipped out of the room. When he heard her footsteps on the stairs he turned back to his to-be wife. She was watching him, her chin resting in her hand as her elbow rested on the tabletop.

"So, are you going to tell me why I woke up alone this morning?"

He sighed, shrugging lightly. "Like I said, I had a dream."

"What kind of dream?" she asked. She could tell by the way he was avoiding her eyes that it hadn't been a simple little dream. It had bothered him, immensely so and she didn't like seeing the disturbed look on his face. He opened his mouth to tell her it had been nothing but...he didn't want to lie to her.

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?" he said softly, his tone more pleading than defensive.

"Okay, I won't ask anymore then." Her own voice had softened, not a trace of offense in it. If he didn't want to talk about it she wasn't going to push him. "Do you mind if I ask you what you were doing in the dueling room?"

"No, I don't mind. As a matter of fact, there's something I wanted to talk to you about." He leaned forward until his elbows were resting on the table. "I controlled it!" he said excitedly.

"Um, controlled what?" she was looking at him weirdly, not understanding what he was talking about. He placed his hands flat on the table and spread out his fingers. Hermione leaned forward herself.

"The power. It was rushing through me but instead of just letting it run wild I *took control*. I thought about what I was going to do before I used it and it worked." He was grinning by then but Hermione still looked slightly confused. He had been speaking rather fast in his excitement.

"Hold on a second Harry." She held up a hand. "Are you talking about what I think you're talking about? I thought you couldn't call up that power at will?"

"Well I didn't exactly call it up. I was...upset last night. It started the same as it usually does but I was scared I would hurt you so I was able to get myself to the dueling room. It was different by then though. I was able to keep a grip on it; I was controlling it enough to keep myself from just exploding. Then after that I could actually control it the way I wanted to!" Hermione leaned back in her chair with widened eyes.

"Wow...that's amazing Harry! If you could gain that much control over it, *think* of what you could do if you could call it up at will." She was practically bouncing in her chair, he could see that familiar excited gleam of discovery he had seen every time she had found a new spell. "I think that with a little practice you will be able to. This is a real breakthrough." He nodded in agreement as his eyes moved from her face and to the window at her back. One of his hands dropped to a napkin and he fiddled with it as he stared out at the early morning brightness of the sun with a far off expression.

"I know. It wasn't death eaters I was using it against just now but if I can keep that kind of control over this power, the next time we face them...I can keep what happened to Rachel from happening again." He clenched the napkin in his hand, his bright eyes narrowing with anger and residue grief. The feel of soft fingers on top of his tightly

clenched fist startled him slightly and he looked away from the window to Hermione. She was staring at him with this strange mix of sadness, understanding, and something he couldn't identify. She tilted her head and smiled sadly.

"I thought that what happened wasn't just *your* fault?" she said softly. He sighed and his hand loosened. He let go of the napkin and turned his hand over, slipping his fingers into hers.

"I understand that it's just...that's not what I'm trying to say." He sighed again and leaned back in his chair, keeping his hold on her hand. "It was just so *unnecessary*. The way she died." He shook his head. "It didn't have to happen. What I'm trying to say is that if I can really control this power like I need to, I can end this war so much sooner. There won't have to be anymore deaths like hers." Hermione suddenly tensed, frowning as she stared at him.

"Harry...what exactly are you planning?" even though it didn't show on her face, he could feel her mounting panic by the sudden death grip she had on his hand. He shook his head quickly, giving her a smile in hopes of reassuring her.

"Calm down 'Mi, I'm not saying I'm planning on running off tomorrow to find Voldemort and challenge him to a duel." He scoffed. She used her free hand to slap his arm but he could see the tension drain from her shoulders.

"You can't really blame me for getting a little worried there, Harry. It wouldn't be totally unlike you to run off after a fight if you thought it could protect someone." She squeezed his hand affectionately. "Anyway, I know the prophecy and while it says that it *might* be you that can only defeat Voldemort, it doesn't say you have to take every responsibility onto your shoulders."

"With power comes responsibility Hermione. If I have this power then it must be something and I have no doubt that I have it to defeat Voldemort." He frowned and slipped his hand out of hers to run it through his hair. "And what do you mean it 'might be' me? It says so very clearly that its better."

Hermione shook her head. "It says, '*neither can live while the other survives.*' Not, '*only one can kill the other.*' That line doesn't mean that you absolutely have to be the one to kill him, Harry." He could only stare at her in shock for a moment, his mouth slightly open. His mouth snapped closed with a muted 'click' and he scowled.

"Are you kidding me? Who else would stop him, Hermione?" It made no sense. There was no one else that could stop Voldemort, this he knew for sure. From what he had known, even before the prophecy on some level, it was his life's one true purpose. Since Voldemort had killed his parents it had been his duty and now she was trying to tell him that that wasn't true? The thought of all he had gone through and lost to that bastard being in vain, of not being the one to strike that final blow and repay him for all he had destroyed, threw him for a complete loop.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't be so dramatic Harry." The rebuke was said gently, she could see the growing lost and angry look in his eyes. "As much as I wish it wasn't, I do believe it'll be you Harry. I simply don't know of anyone with as much strength and as much love as you. I'm just saying that the *prophecy* doesn't say specifically that only you can destroy him. Divination isn't always an exact art."

He smiled rather sheepishly at his bit of a...overreaction as he forced himself to relax. His eyebrows rose though at her last few words. "Isn't always? I thought you didn't believe in divination at all." She waved a hand dismissively.

"I don't believe in that ball of glitter and fluff that taught it to us. The majority of her predictions were rubbish." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I do think some divination is genuine. I'm not so ignorant to believe that I know everything about the world and I know there are some things that can't be explained in books, shut up Harry." She cut him off before he could even comment and he shrugged, grinning a bit.

"What about Luna then?" he asked. She furrowed her brows.

"What about her?"

“Well, there are a lot of things she says are real that you refuse to believe because you haven’t seen them or read about them before.” She snorted and waved her hand again.

“That’s different. Those creatures she prattles on about are completely ridiculous.”

He opened his mouth to point out the blatant double-standard there but closed it again, deciding against it. As stubborn as Hermione was, he doubted whatever he would say would make a difference. He shook his head and steered the conversation back to the original topic. “As I was saying, this power can make all the difference Hermione. It’ll give me some kind of edge over Voldemort, besides the horcruxes. That teacup upstairs is the last one other than Nagini and Voldemort himself. I have to prepare myself now to end this.” He said, the words spoken with intensity. Cautiously, Hermione placed her hands in front of her and held them up slightly as if she was trying to physically slow his words.

“I know it is Harry and I *agree* with that.” She spoke slowly, choosing her words carefully. “I just don’t think that you’re ready for him *now*. You shouldn’t be pinning your hopes on this power so soon; getting ready to use it when you haven’t had a chance to understand it right now. You don’t know what the limitations of it are yet.”

“I know, I just...its *something*.” This power, this magic he had was some kind of hope. Something tangible he could use that helped him to feel less vulnerable in all of this, made him feel as if he had something other than just luck to stand on. For a moment Hermione looked at him, searching his face for something he couldn’t see before her shoulders drooped. She appeared to pull into herself, biting her bottom lip as a look of fear crept into her eyes. Harry was immediately and forcefully reminded of the way she had looked in the shower last night. Instinctively, he reached across the table towards her and she latched onto his hand with a surprising amount of strength, clinging to him in her sudden uncertainty.

“I understand Harry but I need you to promise me that you won’t go after him anytime soon. Promise me that you won’t put yourself in danger unless you have no choice. If not for me, for Cattie. Neither

one of us could live without you.” Her tone was so pleading that he felt the words dig into his heart and he nodded without hesitation. He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it, dipping his head to make sure that their eyes met.

“I promise, for Cattie and for you. I won’t leave either of you without a fight.” She sniffled once and he could make out the slight shimmer of tears in her eyes but she smiled.

“I wouldn’t dare let you.”

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They ended breakfast and soon the couple was trekking up the stairs and back to their bedroom where the Horcrux still sat. It was agreed that as both of them were in much, *much* better shape than they had been the night before that there was no need to put off destroying the thing. Really, Harry just wanted to get it over and done with as soon as possible. Knowing that it was the last one they would have to search for, that destroying it was one of the final steps in killing Voldemort filled him with more than a little satisfaction. As he picked the little golden cup up from the coffee table he smiled grimly, turning the delicate chalice over in his hands as if searching for some sort of mark or dent in it that showed what it held but there was nothing. It just sat there, cold and glinting in the soft light of the bedroom.

“It’s really a shame, isn’t it?” Hermione said from where she had appeared at his shoulder. He looked away from the teacup and to her, puzzled.

“What is?”

She plucked the cup from his loose grasp, her hold on it more gentle than his as she held it up to inspect it. “There are so few things left of the founders and here we are, having to destroy them. It’s just really a shame to see so many precious things dishonored and tainted by such an evil thing as that creature’s soul.” She cupped it in her hands, running her thumb over the unblemished gold. “Such a lovely thing too. Oh well, lets get this over with.” She turned on her heel and began walking out of the room. Bemused, he followed after her and to the dueling room.

The scorched table was set up per usual and Harry set the daggers he had retrieved earlier on top of it. Hermione set the cup down at the center of the table and looked over at him.

“Ready?”

“More than ready.” It was weird. This time felt different from the others, there was an excitement running through his veins that hadn’t been there since the first time they had done this. It was the knowledge of the fact that this was in a way the last one. He was almost giddy with the mix of anxiousness and anticipation. Without further ado he selected his dagger, humming in pleasure at the rush of the familiar feeling that followed. He positioned himself at one side of the table and watched as Hermione picked up her own dagger. Their eyes met and she nodded. In unison, the gleaming weapons sliced threw the air and into Hufflepuff’s teacup.

It only took a few minutes, the entire process and when he and Hermione were picking themselves off of the floor, the after affect of nervous energy flowing through them, Harry admittedly felt slightly disappointed. He didn’t know why but, he had expected it to be a bit more...eventful. That was a little ridiculous really he knew, while it *felt* like the last Horcrux it really wasn’t. There were still two more and those were hidden in much darker places. Even the resulting jubilation from the annihilation of the Horcrux couldn’t mask the shiver of fear that ran down his spine.

“I feel sort of bad at having to contribute to such a loss of history.” Hermione said as she vanished the half melted bits of what was left of the teacup from the table. She turned to him, placing her hands on her hips and tilting her head. “I feel a little strange. That was the last Horcrux...I don’t know what we need to do next. We’re in no way prepared to go after Voldermort, we wouldn’t know where to find him even if we were so what do we do in the meantime?” he could only shrug, though from the thoughtful way she spoke, she wasn’t really expecting an answer from him. Lips pursed as she thought, she moved over to stand next to him. She looked up at him, smiling wryly.

"I guess all we can do is prepare ourselves for when the time comes. Answered my own question, didn't I?" Harry chuckled, looping an arm around her waist comfortably.

"You're the only person who can ever really answer your questions, 'Mi." he began leading them out of the dueling room. She brought her own arm around his waist, sidling herself a little closer to him as they walked through the corridor.

"Are you trying to say that I'm complicated?"

"Not complicated, just too smart for me." She laughed, nodding.

"Well, that's true."

When they reached the landing of the second floor, Hermione pulled herself out of his arms and smiled up at Harry. "I had something I wanted to research in the library."

He returned the smile. "Alright, anything you need help with?" she shook her head.

"Nah, I have it under control." She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek before continuing down the hallway towards the library. He watched her go with the smile still on his face. She really was everything to him. He knew what type of person he was, he knew that if it wasn't for Hermione *and* for Cattie he would have been up and after any sign of Voldemort as soon as the teacup was destroyed. But now...now he had something worth more than his life to lose. He had people that needed him now, needed him for more than just to be a pawn in a war. He had the responsibility of a family, a daughter and a soon-to-be wife that he couldn't bear to imagine leaving. They were a sharp dose of reality that kept the rashness and self-righteousness from taking him over.

Still smiling, he shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants and began meandering back up the stairs, a half formed idea brewing in his mind. He really didn't have much of a plan for the day other than lunch with Ron but that would be a few hours from now so he had to do something to take up the time. Catalina peered out of her portrait at him when he appeared back in the corridor.

“Back again? Where is your bride?” she asked, really only sounding half-interested as she rubbed the fat cat on her lap. Harry slowed, turning to walk backwards as he answered her.

“She’s in the library at the moment.” He stopped in front of Branson’s portrait. The beautiful woman in the portrait across from him smiled, stretching to lounge back in her chair.

“It is good to marry an intelligent woman. It will keep you out of much trouble.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “You have no idea how true that is.” She chuckled lowly.

“And where are you going now?”

“Um, I was thinking of heading into the vault.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the empty portrait behind him. “There are a few things that I haven’t had a chance to look at.” The dark haired woman sat up, a spark of interest in her eyes. She looked at him and smiled.

“There are many things in the vault that you should make sure to explore. Much of our family’s history is stored there.”

“Oh, well I’ll be sure to do that.” He smiled a little and gave a wave to the portrait before turning to the portrait behind him. Bronson was currently absent from his frame. He lifted his hand and knocked twice on the gilded frame and after a small quiver, it smoothly slid open. Harry went to step inside, waving at Caterina once again as he stood halfway in the newly revealed doorway. She wiggled long, elegant fingers in return and he moved completely inside. Bright light instantly lit the room around him. It had been a while since he had been in here, and the first time by himself, and for a moment he just stood and gazed about at the opulence of the vacant ballroom he was now standing in. It was a little sad that such a beautiful room now laid empty, now nothing more than a corridor but really, he couldn’t seem himself throwing any grand balls anytime soon.

Feeling a little awkward standing alone in the spacious room, he began walking towards the doors at the far end of the room, his lone footsteps echoing loudly on the gleaming marble. He crossed the

room and stopped in front of the larger of the two and thinking back to what Manny had showed him and Hermione all those months ago, he placed his palm flat against the door.

“May I enter?”

Just as before, his hand seemed to warm for a split second before swinging open. The room was lit with bright, warm light and everything was still arranged neatly on the rows and rows of shelves and tables. There were at least thirty shelves that Harry could see from where he was standing and each shelf held about two hundred scrolls. On each shelf there was a golden plaque at the top and every plaque was printed with a year. Each scroll was fitted snugly into its own slot; a small golden plaque with a name of a Potter or an event carved into it was placed above each slot. From what he could tell each shelf held about ten years of history.

Slowly, moving as if he was afraid to disturb the careful order of the room, he walked over to the shelving holding the aged scrolls he had only taken a moment to look at the last time he had been inside the room. He licked his lips as he felt an unexplained flutter in his stomach. His hands itched to reach out and pull out the nearest scroll but he hesitated. The entire history of the Potter family, *his* entire history was literally just at his fingertips and he hesitated. It was just that he had spent so many years knowing so very little about his family that it was a little overwhelming to know that he could suddenly know everything. He wasn't sure if he was completely ready for it yet but the idea to come to this place had entered his mind so unexpectedly that he had found himself heading up the stairs before he had even thought about it.

He shook off his hesitation and stepped closer to the shelves. He wasn't even sure where to start. There was just so *much*. He wandered through the shelves, not actually paying attention to what year he was looking at, peering up at the plaques until a name caught his eye. '**Harold Mason Potter**'. His grandfather. Harry had to stand on his toes to reach the very first scroll on the topmost shelf and slide it out of its slot. It was surprisingly heavy as he held it by the wooden handles on each end and it was about a little over half the length of his forearm. He turned the scroll over in his hands. It was strange,

when he had thought of his family all he could ever think of was his parents. Never once had he ever really taken the time to think about his grandparents, not on either side, so now that he could know about them there were all these questions rushing through his head.

He looked about him, looking for a chair or something to sit on but the only things that filled the room were the rows and rows of tables and shelves completely covered with his family heirlooms. Shrugging, he folded his legs and sat on the cool floor. He leaned his back against one of the sturdy shelves and began to unravel the scroll in his hands. The parchment was thick and heavy, obviously aged but apparently charmed as the curvy black writing that appeared looked as if it had only been penned the day before. The roll of parchment was only a few feet long. He unraveled it until the end of the scroll rested in his lap and held it up to his face.

Harold Mason Potter (Deceased: 1981)

Date of Birth: June, 15th, 1934

Father: Herbert Thomas Longbottom (Deceased: 1950) Mother: Marseille Gretchen Potter (Deceased: 1967)

Sibling(s): Lucille May Potter (Deceased: 1940), James David Potter (Deceased: 1979)

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. . . . Juniper Elizabeth Potter (Deceased: 1975)

Harry stopped reading and stared at the section of parchment in his hands with his mouth hanging open. 'Longbottom?' His great grandfather was a Longbottom? That meant he and Neville were related. He leaned his head back against the shelf behind him, frowning up at the high ceiling. If he and Neville were related...it could explain why they were linked the way they were, why they were *both* mentioned in the prophecy. Did it have something to do with his

family? Well *their* family? He wondered if Neville knew anything about this. He lifted his head from the shelf, shaking it. No, he doubted the other boy had any idea. He probably would have said something if he had. Anyway, what if it really did have something to do with their families? What possible connection could their bloodline have with Voldemort and why would it pull them into the prophecy? Shaking his head again he sighed, absentmindedly noting that his hair was growing long again as he bangs flew up. He placed the thought of his and Neville's familial connection on the back burner and went back to the parchment now resting limply in his hands. He lifted it back up and began to read again.

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Father: Herbert Thomas Longbottom (Deceased: 1950)***Mother:*** Marseille Gretchen Potter (Deceased: 1967)

Sibling(s): James David Potter (Deceased: 1979)

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. . . . Juniper Elizabeth Potter (Deceased: 1975)

Descendents: Sarah Alice Potter (Deceased: 1959), James Harold Potter (Deceased: 1982)

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. . . . Harold James Potter

The scroll fell to his lap again. He blinked blankly. He hadn't known his father had a sister...she had died before he had even been born.

He really was the only one left wasn't he? Of course he had known that he was the last of his family line but to see it in black and white was like confirming a long held fear. He wasn't really hurt by it, all he could feel was a grim acceptance. His entire immediate family had been wiped out, all except for him. How had they all died? He looked up at the shelves around him and the scrolls filling them. He bet there was a scroll there for every single one of them. He was going to find out what had happened, how he had lost his entire family before ever getting a chance to know any of them.

He sat on that floor for at least an hour reading through his grandfather's scroll. Everything was listed factually and while he got to learn much more about the man who had raised his father, he was a little disappointed. All that was written was facts; he didn't get to learn anything about what kind of man his grandfather actually was. Was he funny? Or serious? Did he play Quidditch? What kind of father had he been? He didn't know but he did learn about the man, not as much as he would have liked, but he learned about him.

When he had attended Hogwarts he had, of course, been a Gryffindor and he had made it as Head Boy in his seventh year. After he had graduated he became an Auror and later the head of the department in the Ministry. One thing he did learn that rang the most was him was the way his grandfather had died. Shortly after he had been born, Harold Potter the 1st had been killed after heading a raid on the home of a suspected Voldemort supporter. It had been a trap and his grandfather and his team had been outnumbered. He didn't make it out alive.

There had only been a small section that mentioned his grandmother so he guessed these scrolls were only for blood Potters. Babette Potter was born in Paris, France in 1936 and she hadn't attended Hogwarts, she had been schooled at the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic. After she had graduated she became a primary school teacher and shortly after she had married his grandfather. She had passed away only a year before her husband; the cause of her death was only listed as 'illness'.

Reaching the end of the scroll he dropped it into his lap and crossed his arms over his chest, once again leaning his head against the shelf

behind him. He found himself blinking up at the ceiling again though his mind was miles away. Reading the scroll really left him with this feeling of overwhelming curiosity, the hunger to know *more*. He wanted to know who these people had really been not just a bunch of facts written on parchment. He wanted to truly know what he had lost. He quickly rolled the up the scroll and grabbing hold of the edge of the shelf, hefted himself to his feet. He winced as he stood; regretting sitting so long on the hard floor as the feeling began to painfully return to his legs. He stretched to return the scroll carefully to its place before beginning to scan the shelves again. He picked up every single name he recognized, every Potter's name he had seen in his grandfather's scroll. He sat on that floor for what felt like hours, scrolls surrounding him as he read through each and every one of them, trying to find out how his family had died.

His great grandfather had been killed in a broom accident, having been accidentally knocked from his broom during a game of Quidditch. His wife had died of simple old age, long after the death of her husband. His grandfather's brother, the first James Potter had apparently been a Squib and had probably been the only to actually die in a car crash. His one and only child, having been seven or so had contracted pneumonia and died only two years before him. Harry's heart constricted in pain for the man, now that he had Cattie he couldn't even imagine what he would do if something so horrible had happened to her. The one thing that had shocked him the most was the knowledge that his father had once had a sister. She had only been six months old when his grandparents had lost her. It hurt so much to read, to see exactly how tragedy filled his family was. Nearly all of them in the last fifty years it seemed like had died young.

He blinked, trying to ease the sudden burning in his eyes. His throat constricted and he took in a shuddering breath. Was he completely destined for this? A lifetime of death and loss?

"No." he growled out, his rasping voice sounding loud in the empty room. He allowed the scroll in his hand to fall to his lap and he shook his head. No, he wouldn't let that kind of tragedy ravage his family again. He was no longer the last Potter, with Cattie and his future marriage to Hermione he wasn't the only one anymore. He took another breath, forcing himself back under control and swallowing

past the burning in his throat. He nodded once to himself, firmly. He was going to be stronger now; he was going to break this cycle of tragedy.

He was rolling the last of the scrolls and slipping them into their corresponding slots when he heard footsteps behind him. He looked over his shoulder as he slid Juniper Potter's scroll into its slot to see Hermione coming making her way over to him. Feeling a sudden lightness in his chest, he turned to face her as she came to stand in front of him. It was strange how just seeing her smile at him the way she was then still made his heart skip a beat and everything suddenly seemed brighter.

"Here you are." She grinned. "I've been looking all over for you. Caterina just told me you were in here." She glanced up at the shelves over his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

He shrugged lightly. "I was just...learning a bit more about my family." He reached forward to place his hands on her waist, tugging her gently until she was leaning against his chest. Hermione allowed herself to be pulled, giggling slightly as she leaned into him. She rested her chin on his chest and looked up at him.

"Oh? Did you find out anything interesting?"

"Yes actually. Did you know that I'm related to Neville?"

Her brows rose. "Really? Well," she tilted her head thoughtfully, lips pursed. "You are from a pureblood family. Nearly every pureblood family is related some way or another." He shrugged.

"Yeah. Herbert Thomas Longbottom was my great grandfather. I was thinking that the fact that we're related could have something to do with the prophecy."

"Hmm, that could definitely be a possibility. Maybe you should talk to Neville's grandmother? She might know something about Herbert Longbottom."

"That's a good idea Hermione." He grinned down at her and she rolled her eyes, reaching up a hand to tap his chest.

"Yes, yes I know. I'm a genius, what would you do without me, etcetera, etcetera." She ignored his snort of laughter and continued. "Anyway, I came up here to tell you that it's already nearly twelve. Ron's coming, remember?"

He gave her an exaggerated roll of his eyes. "Of course I remember, dear wife. But thanks anyway for reminding me." He pressed a sound kiss on her forehead. When she didn't react he looked down curiously into her face, noticing the little smile on her lips and the spots of color on her cheeks, the way she was staring up at him. He frowned, bewildered.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" the little smile widened.

"Wife?"

Instantly he could feel heat rush to his cheeks and he shrugged, embarrassed. His eyes darted away from hers. "What? You're practically my wife aren't you?" Hermione snorted and rolled her eyes, still smiling as she tapped his chest again.

"Practically my wife? Good save there, Harry." She stood on her toes and pressed her lips firmly against him. "But it was sweet so you're forgiven, *dear husband*." She stepped out of his arms but grabbed his hand as she began towing the now grinning, though still slightly blushing, Harry out of the room. "Come on, Ron should be here soon."

"Yes ma'am." He teased. He allowed himself to be dragged out of the room.

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Harry, Hermione, and Cattie had opted to all wait in the family room for their guest to arrive. Harry was half lounging on the couch with Cattie perched on his lap, staring at the fireplace with apparent eagerness, and Hermione was sitting cross-legged at the end of it by his feet. Every once in awhile he would glance at her face, trying to see if there was any sign of any type of uneasiness with Ron coming here without the rest of the DA. He didn't see any uneasiness but her gaze was far away, as if she was deeply thinking over something.

Was she uncomfortable with the idea of Ron coming? He didn't know. She hadn't seemed all that upset or worried earlier but who knew what was going on in her head.

"Harry, why are you staring at me?" her voice surprised him enough for him to realize that he had been staring at her for at least two minutes while he had been caught up in his thoughts. He started so much that he nearly made Cattie tip right off of his lap.

"Hey!" she exclaimed indignantly, pouting up at him.

"Sorry." He apologized to both his girls, kissing Cattie on the top of sending Hermione a sheepish smile to which she shook her head, amused. A couple of seconds later the small smoldering fire in the hearth suddenly flared to life and Ron tumbled rather gracelessly out of the bright green flames. Hermione reached him first and began to help him to his feet and Harry stood from the couch, placing Cattie on the floor.

"You alright there, mate?" Harry grinned as he made his way over to Hermione and Ron, the latter dusting ash from his worn jeans and dark blue sweater. The redhead looked up from his task and grinned at him, rolling his eyes good-naturedly.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He looked away from Harry and to Hermione who was standing in front of him silently, smiling. Harry could feel something inside of him twist when he saw the tell-tell redness appear on Ron's cheeks and the tips of his ears. Forcefully, he reminded himself that he couldn't really expect anything else from the other boy. He had liked her and it wasn't going to all suddenly go away.

"Um thank you for, you know, helping me out and all." Ron murmured to her, his blush deepening as he smiled with embarrassment. The twist returned with renewed vengeance. Hermione only smiled, seemingly taking no notice of Ron's apparent awkwardness.

"There's nothing to thank me for Ron, that's what friends are for after all."

Harry could have sworn he saw Ron give a flinch at the word 'friend' and he immediately felt guilty for the resulting feeling of satisfaction. The room lapsed into a short moment of awkward silence as the three friends stood in front of the fireplace. They were all at a loss for what to say. The uncomfortable moment was broken when Cattie suddenly moved from the spot by Harry's leg to stand in front of the newcomer.

"Hi!" she greeted happily with her hands on her hips, grinning up at the gangly man. Ron blinked down at the curly haired little girl for a moment before a smile began tugging at his lips.

"Err, hi. You're Cattie right?"

She nodded. "Yeah and you're Ron. Dad said that you're having lunch with us." Ron's eyes darted over to Harry at the word 'dad' before returning to the child in front of him.

"You're Dad's right, I am."

"Good." She chirped. Without further ado she reached up and grabbed his hand, beginning to tug the much bigger man towards the door. "Because I'm hungry." Ron seemed surprised at the child's action but he followed her, looking over his shoulder at Harry and Hermione and shrugging with a bemused smile. Harry and Hermione were surprised themselves. Cattie was in nature a somewhat shy child, it wasn't something usual for her to take to someone so quickly other than maybe Remus. It was more than likely that with all the stories they had told her about him she felt like she knew him already. Shrugging himself, Harry followed after them.

Walking backward, he smirked at Hermione. "Come on 'Mi, before the two of them try to steal our share too." With a snort, she followed.

Ron let out a low, appreciative whistle when he and the small family stepped into the family dining room, he being dragged to a seat on the left side of the table by an enthusiastic Cattie.

"Sit by me." She commanded, directing him to a chair. She caught a sharp glance from her mother and quickly added a 'please' before climbing into the free seat next to Ron. She turned and beamed at

him and he grinned back. He looked from the little girl to Harry and Hermione who were sitting themselves across from them.

“Nice place you guys have here.” He commented. Surprisingly there seemed to be little jealousy to be detected in his voice, if anything there was actual admiration.

Harry settled himself into his seat and nodded. “Thank you, it was my grandparent’s place.” As Hermione was placing her napkin in her lap, four plates of food popped into existence in front of them. Ron exclaimed in pleasure at the piping hot Shepard’s pie and pumpkin juice that appeared in front of him.

“Bloody hell! You guys have Hogwarts service here.”

“Ron!” Hermione gasped, sending a pointed look to a giggling Cattie. He blushed, his smile sheepish.

“Sorry.” Harry had to lift his glass of pumpkin juice to his mouth to hide his smile.

“And its not just ‘Hogwarts service’, Ron.” Hermione continued. “We have house elves.”

Ron rolled his eyes, shoving a healthy forkful of his pie into his mouth. “Yeah, I kinda figured that ‘Mione.” He managed to mumble out through his mouthful. Hermione’s lips compressed into a thin line and she glared at him disapprovingly as crumbs spray from his mouth. Harry grinned. It suddenly felt just like old times, like the three of them were back sitting in the Great Hall.

“So how have things been back at Hogwarts?” he asked, beginning to dig into his own food. Ron shrugged, swallowing his food pointedly before answering.

“It’s...different I guess.” He shrugged again. “Mostly because you guys aren’t there, the whole place just seems gloomy. Everyone has been sayin’ that you two are in hiding from V-Voldemort. Then Malfoy isn’t there either so most everyone’s agreed that he ran off and became a death eater. That’s not what the Slytherins say about him though. They’ve been trashing him big time, saying he’s a

coward and that he ran off or he's dead. I almost want to tell 'em that the great git is living with Lupin just to see their faces." He grinned. Harry laughed, nearly choking on his food as he did so and Hermione sighed in exasperation at them both.

"So, everyone really thinks that we're in hiding from Voldemort?" she asked. Ron's grinned faded into a frown and he nodded. Harry also noted that there was a surprising absence of a flinch when Hermione said the name of the Dark Lord. So maybe Ron had gotten over his fear a little, though he still seemed to have trouble saying the name.

"Yeah. Well not everyone at Hogwarts really, a few people believe it but it's mostly the Slytherins going on about it. You know, Harry being so scared of V-Voldemort that he's hiding out somewhere. It's just kinda what the papers have been saying lately. But don't worry mate," he looked from Hermione to wink at Harry. "The DA hasn't been lettin' anybody get away with saying that about you." He shoved another forkful of food into his mouth. Harry definitely felt grateful that the DA, his friends were making sure to stick up for him like that but that didn't stop the spark of anger in his chest.

"The papers are saying that about me?" he growled. His mouth too full to speak, Ron nodded. Harry and Hermione exchanged a look. She could see from the hard frown on his face that the information had upset him. She smiled and reached over and placed her hand on his thigh, squeezing gently in a way that clearly told him to calm down. He forced himself to release a slow breath before he nodded slowly, returning her smile and patting the hand on his leg. He shouldn't be so surprised, with the way the Daily Prophet had been treating him since fourth year it was no surprise that they would latch on to the first thing they could that would make him seem as weak and disloyal in the eyes of the public as they could. When he looked away from Hermione's face he caught Ron watching the two of them with careful eyes, obviously having seen the small exchange between them. When Harry met his eyes he stared at him with a mixed expression for a moment before dropping his gaze back to his dinner plate.

"Anyway." the red head continued, coughing awkwardly. "That reminds me of something I needed to show you guys." His eyes flickered over to the child sitting next to him. "Um, I'm not sure if it

would be okay to show it to you now though.” Cattie had kept her eyes firmly glued to the food in front of her but Harry knew his little girl well enough to know that her ears were wide open. More than likely she was listening intently. Whatever Ron had to show them, it would probably be best to wait until after she was occupied somewhere else.

“I guess you can show us after lunch then. We have something to talk to you about also.” Out of the corner of his eye Harry could see Cattie pout and he grinned. He knew she had been listening. She looked up from her plate finally and pouted at him.

“After I’m gone, huh?” she grumbled. “I never get to hear anything good.” Hermione suppressed her smile at the little girl’s put out expression.

“Eat you food, Cattie.”

Lunch passed quickly, the time being passed by the three of the regaling Cattie with stories of their adventures together at Hogwarts, leaving out the darker bits of course. They were just finishing up the story of Fluffy, both Ron and Harry clutching their stomachs in red-faced laughter, Ron practically falling out of his chair as Hermione tried to explain through giggles why they had even been around the three headed creature in the first place. The child’s eyes were wide and her mouth was hanging open as she listened, absentmindedly forking the last of her food into her mouth. When she had finished, the empty plates all disappeared from the table but they were quickly replaced by plates holding thick slices of lemon cake, all topped healthily with creamy whipped frosting. Harry’s brows rose in amusement. Obviously DeeDi was going the extra mile now that they had a guess, they usually only got desert if they asked for it. Ron seemed pleased though, when his cake appeared in front of him he stopped laughing abruptly with an exclamation of pleasure. He was picking up his fork before he had even fully resettled himself in his chair.

“That’s it; I’m coming to live with you.” He declared, digging into the cake. He scooped a heavy chunk of the moist dessert onto his fork and shoved it into his mouth. He moaned, eyes closing. The ‘so good’

he murmured was barely intelligible through the mouthful of cake. Cattie's mouth had dropped open and she stared up at him with widened eyes.

"Did you really just eat all that?" she asked, disbelief coloring her tone. Still chewing, Ron looked over her and nodded. The little girl stared hard at him for a moment, eyes narrowed before she suddenly grinned. She turned from staring at him to face her own plate of cake, pulling her feet under her so she could sit higher on her chair. She picked up her fork and looked slyly over to the redhead who was just swallowing.

"Race ya!" she dug into her cake with gusto, bringing a forkful of cake as large as his to her mouth.

"Hey!" Ron quickly scrambled to get more cake. "That's cheating!"

"Cattie! Don't eat so fast, you'll choke! You too Ron!" Hermione shouted at the two across from her. The both of them ignored her, continuing their race, and she looked over at Harry for support. He grinned back at her, shrugging as he licked frosting off his own fork.

"Don't choke." Was all he could say to them. He laughed when he saw a smudge of frosting on Ron's nose. Cattie was eating just as quickly as he was yet she managed to keep food from smearing on her face. Hermione shook her head in disapproval and leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she watched for the first sign of choking. It was a quick contest and it ended with the two racing to see who would be the first one to lick the remaining frosting from their plates. Harry couldn't help but laugh again to see his friend suddenly looking like as much of a child as Cattie as he licked frantically at his plate. Cattie had a hard time at it as she was trying to clean her plate between her little breathless giggles but still she won.

"Ha!" she exclaimed, lifting her clean plate above her head triumphantly. She hopped up and stood on her chair, wiggling around in an apparent victory dance. The three 'adults' in the room promptly burst into laughter, though Ron tried hard to keep the defeated expression on his face. Cattie finished her victory dance and stuck her tongue out at Ron who immediately returned it with one of his own.

“Meanie.” He pouted but his blue eyes were sparkling with amusement. Harry’s laughter faded away into a warm smile as he watched Ron and Cattie. He could already see from the look on his friends face he was already developing a soft spot for the little girl. She seemed to have that affect on everyone.

“Alright, alright.” Hermione said, smiling. “You’ve proclaimed your victory, luv. Now you should probably head up to your room and change your shirt.” True, now that she was standing he could see that while she had managed to keep her face free of cake she had gotten smudges of frosting and bits of the yellow dessert on her shirt. The little girl looked down and her mouth pulled into a small ‘o’. She hopped down from her chair.

“Okay, but couldn’t you just use magic to clean it?” she pointed to the mess on her shirt with her little brows up. She put her hands on her hips. “You just want to get rid of me, huh? So you can talk about whatever it is I can’t know.” She really was too smart for them.

“Just go and change your shirt, Cattie.” Harry chuckled. The child shook her head and sighed rather dramatically before turning on her heel and heading towards the doorway.

“Fine but I’m going to remember this.” When she had disappeared through the doorway and they heard her dragging her feet petulantly up the stairs they turned back to one another. Hermione grabbed a napkin from the tabletop and handed it to Ron, gesturing towards his nose with an amused roll of her eyes. He blushed a bit and quickly cleaned off the excess frosting.

“So what’s that like, the kid and all?” he asked, throwing the napkin on the table. He looked at them, genuinely curious. Harry dropped his fork to his now empty plate and leaned back in his chair, shrugging.

“I don’t know, its...good. Really good.” He laughed. “It’s not easy or anything but I don’t know what we’d do without her.”

Hermione nodded in agreement. “It’s kind of hard to explain. Its like we were missing something but never knew it, now that we have Cattie its like life is a bit more complete.” Her smile was soft. “She’s our daughter.”

Ron nodded slowly, staring down at the table with brows furrowed before sighing and shaking his head. "It's weird though. I mean, she's a sweet kid and all but...it's just so weird that you guys are parents, *together*." He looked up from the table to them, lips quirked into a smile that didn't look all that happy. "I guess it sounds selfish but I just can't see where I fit into all this. It feels like the two of you are adults now or something and I'm still...me." Hermione reached across the short expanse of the table and almost hesitantly laid a hand on one of his. He started in surprise; his eyes darted to her face before quickly moving back to the table.

"You fit where you've always been, Ron. Right next to us, right with us. You're our best friend." The words were spoken softly but the finality in it was clearly heard. She was leaving no room for argument. Ron looked up from the table and met her eyes and for a still moment they stared at each other. Harry would be lying if he said those few seconds of eye contact didn't make him feel slightly uncomfortable but he didn't dare interrupt. He and Ron had their chance to talk and work things out the night before and now it was his and Hermione's turn. If he wanted them all to be friends again he knew that they would need to be able to feel that closeness again so he kept silent.

Slowly, Ron began to smile and Hermione was quick to follow. He nodded. "Alright, I understand." He gently slipped his hand out from under hers. "No need to get all mushy on me." Hermione scoffed good-naturedly and leaned back in her chair. Harry smiled himself, feeling the new lightness in the room. Slowly but surely things were returning back to normal, or heading towards a new place in their friendship.

Grinning, he nudged his friend with his foot. "And as our best friend that makes you Cattie's uncle." Ron's already bright smile widened.

"Fine with me. With Hermione being well, *Hermione* and you doing whatever she says," -he ignored Harry's indignant snort- "the kid'll need her Uncle Ron to teach her how to have fun."

Hermione pointed a warning finger at him. "Teach her anything dangerous and I won't hesitate to have you throwing up slugs for the

second time.” A green tint immediately made its way onto Ron’s freckled face and he shuddered in disgusted remembrance.

“Don’t even joke about something like that.” He groaned, clutching at his stomach.

“I’m not joking.” She crossed her arms. “But if you’re going to be a baby about it we can talk about something else. Didn’t you say that you had something you needed to show us?”

“Oh, yeah.” He removed his arms from his stomach and stood up from his chair to reach into his pocket. He withdrew a piece of haphazardly folded paper before sitting back down and placing it on the table, unfolding it and smoothing it out. It was a page torn from the Daily Prophet but what made it so significant was the big bold headline.

Potter Attempts to Duel Death Eaters Single-handedly!

Underneath the headline was a moving picture of what appeared to be Rachel’s house with the dark mark hanging above it. Harry blinked. Then blinked again. With a groan of frustration and disbelief he grabbed at his hair with both hands, laying his head on the table. He should have known that it would get into the papers; of course the Daily Prophet would find some way to report on such a massive and fatal failure.

“Damn.” He had thought that with getting rid of Rita Skeeter the smear campaign against him would stop. Apparently he had been wrong.

“I wasn’t sure if you guys had seen this yet. I guess you haven’t.” Ron said. Harry lifted his head from the table and sighed. “Is this true, mate?”

He sighed again. “Yeah, it’s true. That’s actually what we wanted to talk to you about.”

While Harry had been having his mini-tantrum, Hermione had reached across the table and picked up the section of the paper. She was reading it with a deep frown, her eyebrows furrowed as she

scanned over the words. "So that's what he was up to." She murmured.

"What?" he asked her. Instead of answering she handed the scrap of newspaper to him. Already feeling the dread coming on, he began to read.

Yesterday a full scale attack by the followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

was staged on the home of a witch, Rachel Greythorn, in muggle London.

The reason for the attack remains unknown but what is known is that the Boy-Who-Lived,

Harry Potter was at the scene.

The famous Albus Dumbledore, who was also at the scene has said that Potter,

and his muggle-born girlfriend Hermione Granger, arrived at the home of the late

Mrs. Greythorn before even the Aurors to defend her. The relationship between Mr. Potter

And Mrs. Greythorn is still unknown but Headmaster Dumbledore release this statement:

'Mr. Potter somehow found out about the impending attack on the home of the late

Mrs. Greythorn and after informing me of it he and Ms. Granger proceeded to the home alone.

Mr. Potter acted valiantly in the hopes of saving the life of not only Mrs. Greythorn but also the lives

Of the surrounding muggles. While the woman could not be saved his heroic efforts resulted in the saving of every other

Life in the neighborhood. Mr. Potter should be recognized for such a brave deed as this.'

Mr. Potter could not be reached to answer our questions but we at the Daily Prophet choose to agree with Headmaster Dumbledore.

Mr. Potter has done a great deed and as such he is once again a hero.

The aurors on scene...

Harry lowered the paper, not bothering to read any further as it only went on to describe what the Aurors had guessed of what had happened. Nothing that interested him. It was strange; the Daily Prophet was actually being *nice* to him? And what was that all about from Dumbledore?

"I'm...confused." He stated, turning to Hermione because if anyone understood what was going on it would be her. Ron turned to her too.

Hermione took the paper back from his loose grip. "Can't you see what Dumbledore is doing? Ron said that the paper has been calling you a coward and as such it seems like the public has started to think of you the same way. Dumbledore needs you to be a figurehead in this war, someone for the wizarding world to look to as their hope and to follow you in whatever you do. To do that he needs them to trust in you and to gain that trust you'll need a better public image." She shook the paper. "That's what that little speech of his was about. He needs to make you the hero again. That's why he didn't stop us from leaving Rachel's house yesterday." Harry could only lean back in his chair, shaking his head in bemused amazement.

"That sly, evil bastard." He said.

Hermione placed the paper back on the table. "Evil? Maybe but definitely a genius." Ron frowned.

"Bloody hell. I just can't get used to this 'evil' Dumbledore deal." He shook his head, shaggy hair falling into his face. "So...what were you guys doing there?"

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance. They had agreed it would be best to tell Ron about what happened but they were going to leave out the information on the horcruxes and the prophecy for now. They trusted Ron but with Snape being back at Hogwarts it was just too much of a risk to give him so much information right now. They couldn't risk it somehow getting back to Voldemort that he knew about the horcruxes. Leaning forward, Harry took a deep fortifying breath and plunged into the story. He made sure to just say that they had only happened to pass by Rachel's home and gotten drawn into the fight. It wasn't hard to believe considering Harry's luck so far. Ron's eyes grew larger and larger as Harry spoke, his mouth hanging open. When Harry finally finished speaking he leaned back in his seat, drained and all humor completely gone from his face. Telling the story brought it all back, the respite from the memories he had found by being back home was over. Next to him he heard Hermione sigh softly and he looked over at her. She was staring down at her half eaten plate of cake, poking at it listlessly with her fork and he could see a red tint to her eyes. He took her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

"Bloody hell." He let out with a gust of air. He looked over at them sadly. "I'm sorry."

Harry shook his head. "There's nothing to be sorry about for us, it was Rachel who lost her life."

"I know, I just...I don't know what else to say." He ran a hand through his hair, shrugging helplessly. "I'm just glad nothing happened to you two." He reached across the table and picked up the scrap of the Daily Prophet. "Vol-Voldemort must really be getting stronger if he's making such big attacks now. I guess the DA will have to get a little bit more prepared." He tried for a smile but the atmosphere didn't really permit it. Harry appreciated his efforts. The silence they lapsed into wasn't altogether uncomfortable but it was tense, all three of them caught up in thoughts of Voldemort and death eaters and the darkness that was beginning to take over their world.

The moment was broken by Cattie making her way back into the room, walking slowly as if she was worried she would be sent right back out. She had changed into a pale yellow sweater and for some

reason she was wearing her shoes. Under an arm was one of the balls Harry had bought her back at Diagon Alley. She stopped in the doorway, bright eyes darting between the three people still seated at the table warily.

"What's wrong?" she asked. Hermione quickly gave her a smile and shook her head.

"Nothing's wrong, we were just having a bit of a talk. And why are you wearing your shoes?" the cautious expression disappeared from the child's face and she smiled almost shyly.

"I was wondering if I could go outside."

"By yourself?" Harry asked, lifting his brows. Their yard was gated and it was beyond doubtful that anyone could even find the cottage in the first place but they were still a little wary of allowing the little girl outside alone. Too much had happened for them to allow her to go anywhere by herself.

She shrugged. "Well, yeah."

Really, Harry hated to not allow her anything but what other choice did he have. "I'm sorry, Kitty-Cat but-"

"I can take her." Ron suddenly interjected. All three pairs of eyes darted to him and Cattie drooping face regained its bright grin.

"Really?!"

"Are you sure Ron?" Hermione asked.

He returned Cattie's smile with one of his own. "Of course! I have a couple of hours before I have to be back at Hogwarts and I don't want to spend my entire Hogsmead weekend cooped up inside." Harry clapped his hands one and stood up, beaming. Trust Cattie to be the one to instantly brighten the mood.

"Well then, if you're going out so am I." Ron stood up after him with a laugh and Cattie gave a squeal, nearly dropping her ball in

excitement. She turned to Hermione who was still seated, chin resting in her hand as she watched them with amusement.

"Are you coming too mommy?"

"Yeah *mommy*." Ron smirked. "Are you coming too?"

Harry prodded her on the shoulder. "Come on, 'Mi."

Lips pursed, she sighed dramatically and dropped her chin from her hand, standing slowly. "Alright, alright. I can see when I'm outnumbered."

"Yay!" Cattie skipped over to her mother and grabbed her hand, already beginning to tug her towards the door. Harry and Ron followed the two girls into the hallway, laughing. Cattie let go of Hermione's hand and began to push both her and Harry towards the stairs. "Now, you go put your shoes on and we'll go outside."

Harry kept his feet planted. "No need to push, Cattie." He laughed. He lifted his hand and flicked his wrist, eyes narrowing slightly as he concentrated. Both his and Hermione's shoes flew from their room and down the stairs, along with a jacket for both of them. It was September and it was getting a little chilly outside. He plopped down onto the stairs and began to tug on his shoes, failing to notice the wide eyed way Ron was staring at him. He lifted his eyes from his shoelaces when he began to feel the eyes boring into the top of his head.

"What?" he asked.

"What do you mean 'what'?!" he gestured towards the items lying next to Harry on the stairs. "That! I didn't know you could do all that."

Harry shrugged, reaching for his other shoe. "It's not that big of a deal, its just a few things I've learned."

"How long have you been doing these *things*?" He didn't really sound angry, more irritated that there was something else about his friend that he knew nothing about. Sure he had seen Harry do a couple

small bits of wandless magic during DA meeting but nothing to the extent of summoning so many things at once, especially silently.

Harry could only shrug again. "A few months now." he had finished with his shoes by then and he stood up, hitting Ron on the shoulder casually. "It's really not a big deal Ron. I was actually kind of thinking that the DA should start working on." He smiled, making sure to look into his friends eyes. He hadn't even thought about summoning his and Hermione's things from upstairs before he had done it but even then he hadn't thought that Ron would have such a reaction. The red haired man stared back at him for a moment before nodded, a small if not sudden smile breaking onto his face.

"Yeah, I guess that sounds like a good idea."

"If you two are finished," Hermione spoke up from where she and Cattie were standing, her jacket and shoes already on. "Can we go now?"

Harry quickly pulled his jacket on and grinned at her. "Oh don't let us hold you up."

"We won't then." She reached out for Cattie's hand which the little girl took with a giggle. "Come on Cattie." She turned on her heel and started heading in the direction of the backyard, the little girl giving them a wave and sticking her tongue out over her shoulder.

Ron crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey mate, did she just stick her tongue out at us?"

Harry nodded slowly. "You know what? I think she did. You know what this means don't you?"

"Why, I think I do."

They looked at each other and grinned. At the same time they sprinted towards Hermione and Cattie. Both the little girl and her mother gave a shriek and began running through the hallway and towards the door.

“Run Cattie! Run!” Hermione laughed. The child was giggling and shrieking so much she was breathless before they had even reached the door. Hermione flung open the backdoor and as soon as they hit the grass, Ron put on an extra burst of speed and caught Cattie. The little girl let out a high pitched half laugh half shout as Ron’s long arms wrapped around her and swung her into the air. He stood in the grass and spun her around in fast circles, his arms securely wrapped under her arms, her bright eyes closed tightly and her mouth open as she shrieked and laughed.

“Ron!” Hermione shouted, it coming out somewhere between a shocked gasp and laughter. He stopped spinning her and placed her feet carefully on the ground, keeping his hands on her shoulders as she swayed dizzily on her feet, still gasping with breathless laughter. Ron grinned at Hermione.

“Don’t worry ‘Mione! My brothers used to do this to me and Gin all the time. She’s fine!” as if to prove his point, he let go of her shoulders and she immediately fell down onto the thick grass with an ‘oof’, blinking widely. Hermione raised a brow and he shrugged sheepishly. Cattie struggled to her feet. She managed to stand up on one foot before tipping over and Ron had to quickly grab for her before she could fall into the grass for a second time.

“Do it again!” she laughed. He gave Hermione a look that obviously read ‘See?’ before gripping the girl again and lifting her. Harry sidled up next to his soon-to-be wife and slung an arm over her shoulder as they watched their friend spin Cattie faster and faster, her shrieks coming in an even higher pitch as her legs flailed through the air.

“I’ve missed him.” He said after a moment, smiling.

Hermione’s head came to rest on his shoulder. “Me too.”

“The two of them get on rather well, don’t they?” he jerked his head in the direction of their child and their best friend. Hermione nodded against his shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m glad to see it. But then again Cattie gets along with most people; she seems to like Malfoy well enough.”

His face twisted into an expression of distaste. "That's something I can't even begin to understand."

"Well, I guess Malfoy isn't *that* bad. He's definitely gotten better since he's been living with Remus and Tonks." Harry stepped away from her with a gasp, hand flying to his chest and eyes wide with apparent shock.

"Did you, Hermione Granger, just say that Malfoy isn't '*that bad*'?" he shook his head. "I don't think I know who you are anymore."

"Oh hush Harry." She went to smack him but he dodged her hand and started jogging towards Ron and Cattie, the younger of the two standing while the other was on the ground. She was leaning over Ron who was sprawled spread-eagle in the grass and nudging him with her shoe.

"Hey Ron!" he called as he crossed over to them. "Is it my turn yet?"

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It was nearly four hours later when Ron finally headed back to Hogwarts. They had spent the majority of the time outside, playing around in the backyard with Cattie and allowing themselves to feel as much like kids as she was. They had decided to come in when it had gotten a little too cold and after giving Ron a full tour of the house he had left, still picking grass out of his hair.

"I like him." Cattie stated as the flames of the floo died down. Hermione was standing behind her and she tilted her head back to look up at her mother. "Is he coming back?"

She ruffled her hair. "Yes, you'll see him again." She glanced over at the clock, it was almost five and they still had to visit Remus and Tonks. "Are you two ready to go to Grimmauld?" in contrast to Cattie's enthusiastic 'Yep!' Harry groaned from his laying position on the couch. Sure, he wanted to see the baby and all but he had been up since before the sun rose after barely getting any sleep and then had spent hours running around outside. He was a little tired. With all the speed of a little old man, he forced himself off of the couch and stood.

"The two of you go ahead." He said. "I'll be right behind."

Hermione lifted Cattie into her arms and looked suspiciously at Harry. "You're not just going to stay here and sleep, are you?"

"Of course not!" Okay, maybe he had thought about it for a second or two. "I'll be behind you."

"You better be." She grabbed a handful of floo powder and threw it into the flames; soon both she and Cattie were gone. Harry waited a few seconds before stepping closer to the hearth, trying to convince himself not to just go and lay right back on the couch for a good long nap. He threw in his own floo powder.

"12 Grimmauld Place!"

A/N: Not much happened in this chapter but I hope you enjoyed it! Thank you for being so very patient with me and for reading and reviewing!